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THEODORE ROSCOE

Major Monroe Chooses Weapons

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D. L. AMES

Upset in Utopia

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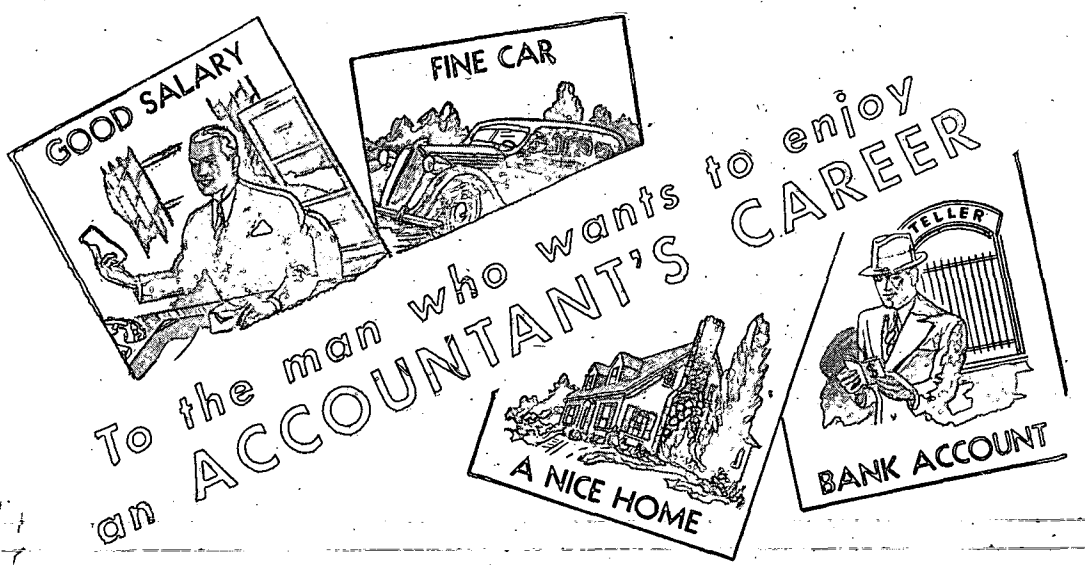

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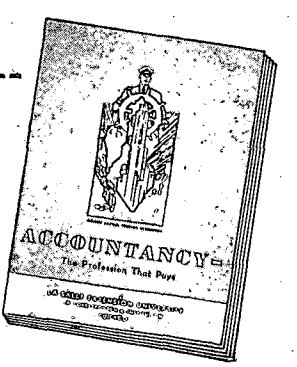

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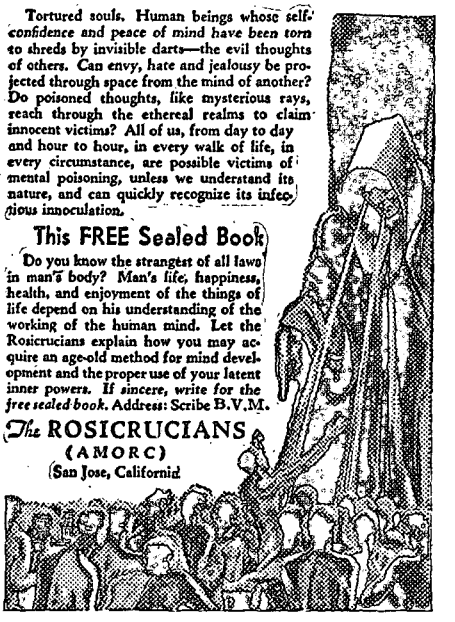

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Major Monroe Chooses Weapons

By THEODORE ROSCOE

Author of "Mr. Madison's Wars," "Death Below Zero," "Three Men and a Tub," etc.

James Monroe

Long remember, America, this man who posted the perpetual *KEEP OUT* notice to European war-lords . . . Here is the story of one fateful frightful day that might have been, when an old Gypsy read History in his palm

I

IF YOU visit Ash Lawn, not far from Monticello, Virginia, you'll come away with memories of a charming little colonial house, a magnificent garden of boxwoods, and a somewhat too statuish statue of James Monroe, Fifth President of the United States and expounder of the famous Monroe Doctrine.

But most of all you may remember a pair of old dueling pistols.

The pistols are cased on a table recessed in the bedroom, and a card over the weapons tells a fascinating yarn in history—an unfinished mystery story.

In 17—James Monroe challenged Alexander Hamilton to a duel. The men had long been political enemies, and in the founding of our Republic the struggle between State and Federal authorities had raised tempers to white heat. The outcome of the engagement between the two patriots is not known—whether the contestants obtained satisfaction on the field of honor, or whether the affair was settled prior to a meeting. Curious as coincidence, it was Aaron Burr who, as James Monroe's second, carried Monroe's challenge to Alexander Hamilton. There is no record of what occurred and the duel remains a mystery, but Fate or friends intervened, and it was Burr who, years later, killed Hamilton on the bloody heights of Weehawken.

MAJOR MONROE was mad. Mad? He was downright savage! His boots scattered gravel as he stamped up the walk-

Alexander Hamilton

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Aaron Burr and the doctor stared into the pine-top. Monroe's eyes blurred as he pulled the trigger, so that he couldn't even see the owl

way; his spurs jingled fiercely; his knuckles shone white on clenched fists; and his forehead under his tricorn was black.

People got out of the way when they saw the major coming like that.

Yes sir, the major was a gentleman from Virginia, sir, with Virginia mustard and Virginia pepper in his blood. He could be quick-tempered as a Shenandoah bobcat and fierce as a Blue Ridge bear, and when Major Monroe was angry he was a mighty angry man.

Right now he was so enraged that the temperature of his fury heated the Revolutionary bullet in his shoulder so that it burned like a ball of molten lead. That didn't do a thing to soothe him, for it reminded him of Trenton: he'd met his enemy in General Washington's tent at Trenton, and the way he felt about it now, he wished he'd shot at him instead of the Redcoats.

"That blackguard! That cockalorum! That clapperclaw! That cozening, office-seeking, money-juggling piece of macaroni!"

Cuss? Well, Major Monroe was an army man. When the major started cussing, the minister put his fingers in his ears just like the historians did later, because James Monroe was a human being first and a soldier second, even if afterward he was President.

He could ride and hunt and shoot like a trooper—he enlisted with Washington's army when he was just turned seventeen—and sometimes the legal terminology and diplomatic wordage which he had to learn afterward didn't strike him as being as honest and straight to the point as some of the words in his trooper's vocabulary.

"That huggermugger! Rat-tail! Son of a sea cook . . ."

Hot and heavy the major was going as

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he slammed on into the house; he flung his hat atop the newel post and pitched his saber across the hall; and strode into the dining room to wet his scorched throat at the liquor cabinet.

Well, that didn't calm him, either; it just seemed to make his blood boil all the hotter. He was glad his wife, Betty, was away visiting with relatives, because it always calmed him down just to look at her, and this time he didn't want to calm down.

"By heaven, I've taken enough from that fellow. This is the last. Absolutely the last!"

He strode up and down the room, glaring, sizzling, snapping his riding crop at the mellow colonial furniture when it got in his way, working up into a regular passion. This storm inside him had been brewing for a long time, and now he'd reached the limit, sir, of what a man of honor could stand.

He didn't go red in the face like plump John Adams, whose temper exploded into tantrums. Wrath turned him white, like a heated Toledo blade; for although his temper was quick, he generally kept it leashed with steely discipline. Then at the end, after a long time forging, his fury was white hot and blinding, like steel melted into lightning.

"I'll horsewhip the man! He'll learn what it is to cross with James Monroe. This time I'll stop his palaver, I'll horsewhip him out of the government!"

Flinging himself into a chair, the major sat breathing and quivering, hands clenched on the chair-arms, body tense as a panther, his features under the cloud of his forehead as white as a starched sheet. Nothing was going to quiet him down this time. At least he was determined. Too long he'd held his wrath caged. Now it was out.

"I've stood a lot. I've put up with his crossing for years. Now he's gone too far. I'll show him what it means to dare take advantage of James Monroe!"

The more the major thought of it, the hotter and whiter he got. Until, sitting there steely-eyed, his boots—the great cavalry boots with the thirteen Revolutionary stars on their musketeer tops—thrust out before him, his hands clenched on the chair-arms and his shoulder throbbing in agony, he was practically molten.

WITH the roaring of inner fires in his ears, he didn't hear the horseman who galloped through the gate. He'd forgotten an expected tea-time call from Aaron Burr. And that was how Burr found him, clenched there in the chair, white and seething with sparks glinting in his eyes and his teeth breathing fire and grimstone.

Well, it didn't take Aaron Burr a second to size up the situation from the doorway—Aaron Burr, tall, dark and handsome, had an eye for situations. He saw the major's sword where it was pitched across the hall. He saw the empty bottle on the liquor cabinet. He saw the major sitting there like a volcano.

"Ah there, Major Monroe—my dear fellow!—what's happened?"

"Burr!" The major was on his feet. "Come in. Come in. Forgive my lack of hospitality. There's brandy. I'll send to the kitchen at once for tea."

"Let's enjoy some brandy; never mind the tea," said Aaron Burr, sweeping forward in his cape. "God's truth, Major, you're white as bone. I pray it's not malaria."

"Malaria!" thundered James Monroe. "It's worse than malaria. I tell you now, Burr, that what's poisoning me is something far worse than malaria. Alexander Hamilton!"

"Hamilton!" said Aaron Burr, quickly narrow-eyed. "Don't tell me, Major—but yes, I did hear at the tavern, coming over, you'd had something of a quarrel."

"Quarrel!" Major Monroe seemed to heighten to nine feet. "Listen, Burr, this was more than a quarrel. It was a fight, sir—a monstrous attack. It was calumnious and unwarranted, a slap from ambush, a venomous assualt. It scoffed at my intelligence and impugned my honor, and it wasn't the first time but it's the last time, for no man can long pick a quarrel with James Monroe."

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"Tell me about it," said Aaron Burr, sitting down and leaning forward, interested. "I heard it was yesterday. What about?"

"What about?" The major was choking.

"The quarrel," said Aaron Burr.

Well, to tell the truth the major had forgotten what it was about. In his rage he couldn't remember the minor details. All he knew was that Hamilton had gotten into his hair, as Hamilton had got in his hair from the first. It wasn't so much what he said, but the way he said it; not so much what he did, but the way he did it.

He was a ruffian, that was all, and the major didn't like him.

"He's been crossing me ever since I met him!" the major roared. "If I vote one way, he deliberately votes the other. If I propose a bill to Congress, he proposes a bill against it. I don't care what side of the fence I'm on, he always takes the opposite. He's stubborn-headed and arbitrary and opinionated and one-sided, and I'm damned if he doesn't think he knows the right way to run the government."

"That's Hamilton all over," agreed Aaron Burr.

"HE WAS that way on George Washington's staff," James Monroe said. "He was that way at the Continental Congress. Now he's that way in Washington's Cabinet —stiff-chinned, never give an inch, contrary as a granite mule."

"Alec Hamilton's like that," Burr agreed.

"I'd swear he put James Madison to running against me in this state," the major glowered, hotter by the minute from reviewing the affair. "Then all these banking bills he's putting through. This attack of his on states' rights. These taxes he's proposing, and that high protective tariff!

"He's a Federalist and a central-government man. Wants a big national bank and his own system of money. I tell you, he's a politician."

"A politician," agreed Burr, who knew the breed perhaps better than he was willing to admit. "Yes, major, he's a politician."

"Now, by heaven, I've had enough of him," the major concluded, gasping. "He's crossed my path in politics for the last time. Do you hear me, Burr? This last is too much!"

"Have another drink," said Burr leaning forward. "You hate him, don't you."

"Hate him?" roared Monroe. "No, I don't hate him. I don't hate anybody. But I can't bear the sight of him, do you understand? I can't abide his politics. He's a favor-currying, vote-getting, ornery umphte-dumph! I don't like him. The world isn't big enough to hold us both."

"He's certainly been a danger to this country," said Burr. His eyes were fixed on something he'd found across the room; fixed in a sidewise stare. And what he was thinking didn't show on his face just then, for his glance was leveled on a case of long-handled dueling pistols, left on a table where the major, a week ago, had been cleaning them.

But the expression of Aaron Burr was one of friendly anxiety and surprise.

"Jehu!" exclaimed this Aaron Burr, looking sidewise at the pistols. "You'd better be careful, major!"

"Careful?" Monroe exploded, sitting up.

"They say Alexander Hamilton is a mighty good shot."

"Shot?" retorted James Monroe, turning in his chair.

"Well, if you've challenged him to a duel —I mean, you're saying the world wasn't big enough for you both—"

"And so it isn't!" thundered Major Monroe jumping up. He rounded at his pistols, glaring. "No, by George! Why didn't I think of it before? So he thinks he's a good shot, does he?"

The major wheeled at Burr. "I suppose he's been boasting about that, too. Now, b'Gad, I'll fix him. I'll show him some true marksmanship if he wishes. You can take him a message from me that I'll meet him any time he dares at his convenience. You're right about him being a danger to the country. This time I'll settle his hash for good and all."

But Aaron Burr's black cloak was al-

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ready fluttering out of the doorway, and the answer from Alexander Hamilton wasn't long in coming.

Choose Your Own Weapons!

II

WELL, they tried to stop it. Jefferson signaled by wigwag from Monticello he was coming over; and he drove up, tall and anxious, concerned for the safety of his junior law-partner. All night they argued under the Virginia stars, Jefferson talking as father to son, for he was that fond of James Monroe.

"I don't like Hamilton's politics, myself," Jefferson pointed out. "But he's done a lot for the nation just the same, and there's no denying he's a brilliant man."

"His brilliance gets in my eye," the young major scoffed. "He talks too smartly for his own blessed good. You've said yourself, sir, that you couldn't listen to him argue, you had to run out of the room for fear of being persuaded. He's dangerous, that's what he is. And I aim to exterminate him, sir."

"But he's an expert shot," Jefferson groaned. "One of New York's finest marksmen."

"And I'm one of Virginia's finest," said James Monroe, drawing himself up. "Do you think a Virginia gentleman would be afraid to test anyone's marksmanship? It's no use, sir. I'm adamant."

Then came little James Madison from Montpelier—little Madison, grave and dignified. He could argue every bit as well as Jefferson, and he didn't try pacifism, but logic. Dueling was really a French custom, argued Madison, and as such it didn't belong on the American scene.

But Major Monroe wouldn't budge for that. He didn't like Madison politically much better than he liked Alec Hamilton, and he took the occasion to point out the fact. Besides, he had an idea that Madison wanted to conciliate, fearing Hamilton might be killed, Madison favoring most of Hamilton's Federalist ideas.

"I'm going to duel him," the major declared. "I've made up my mind. I've had enough of him, sir. That's all."

The Kortrights got wind of it—they didn't tell Betty, but they came over post haste, begging the major not to risk his life.

"I'm not risking it," Monroe assured his in-laws "fighting Alexander Hamilton."

Lastly President Washington, all the way from Mount Vernon, tried to patch it up. He said the country couldn't afford to lose one (or two) of its best men.

But Major Monroe knew all about that—"That cur, Hamilton, has pulled the wool over Washington's eye for years!"—and he politely reminded Washington that it was impossible to back down from a duel; and Washington, being an army man, remained silent, knowing the code.

"I'm dueling Hamilton," James Monroe concluded to his friends. "There's no use trying to stop me. I've suffered from that rascal's opposition for years, and I've made up my mind to put an end to him. Even if I wanted to I couldn't back down after a formal challenge—and, by Godfrey, I don't want to."

SO THAT was that and preparations went ahead for the duel, Aaron Burr generously offering to take care of all the arrangements. A field was picked out, not far from Ash Lawn in Virginia, and a surgeon was arranged for—it might've been Dr. Benjamin Rush.

Word came to Major Monroe that Alec Hamilton was up at dawn every day on a pistol range, getting into mighty fine form. Aaron Burr brought a story that Hamilton said they ought to have an undertaker instead of a surgeon, and Hamilton had agreed to meeting in Virginia because he figured it was nicer for a man to die near his home.

James Monroe was fit to be tied when he heard that.

"I'll riddle him," he promised. "I'll have him so heavy with lead it'll take a tandem of seventy-five oxen to drag him back to New York. You can tell him for me, Burr, that I've sworn an oath to eradicate him.

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It's just as a favor to a condemned man that I let him draw his last breath in Virginia!"

And the major flung up a handful of playing cards, and, loading and firing like a madman, shot the spots out of all the hearts up to the nine before they fluttered to the ground.

That was pretty good shooting, but not good enough for Major Monroe. He said he wouldn't be satisfied till he could drill every heart in the deck; and Aaron Burr chuckled and rubbed his hands.

All that week the major never left the house without his pistols. See a hoptoad under the hedge, he'd shoot it. See a bottle floating in a creek, he'd blow it to pieces. He knocked the corks out of jugs at twenty paces, and picked crows out of cornfields across the road, and hit just about everything or anything that made a target.

Still, he wasn't satisfied. He knew he mustn't underestimate the enemy. Hamilton must be pretty confident to've accepted a mortal challenge; and along about the middle of the week came news from the Hamilton camp like to've scared anybody else but Major Monroe.

Hamilton was shooting the pine cones out of the tops of trees. Yes sir, and doing it with pistols from the ground. Pick out a particular cone, and he'd knock it down. Nobody had seen any better shooting at a stationary target, and Hamilton's seconds were laying bets of two to one.

"Stationary targets!" thundered Major Monroe. "I'm shooting at *moving* targets! I expect him to be running, d'ye see!"

That afternoon he went out to the woods, and things looked pretty dark for the 'possums, bobcats and coons. Only there weren't any 'possums, bobcats and coons around that afternoon, and the major began to wonder where all the moving targets could've gone.

He tramped a long way, hunting something to shoot at, and finally he drew a bead on a big old owl.

It was high in the tree, about a hundred yards perhaps, and the major, sniping fast —and the light being bad—missed the shot. Major Monroe made haste to load, and the owl made haste to depart, hooting around to the other side of the tree.

But it wasn't a very wise owl, for it peeked angrily from around behind the treetop. In the brush at James Monroe's back there was a spanking bang, and that hoot owl came plummeting down with a bullet in its eye.

"Ye gods and little fishes!" the major had to swear, for he'd never seen a shot like that. "What sharpshooter is this who can hit an owl as it peeks around a treetop?"

"One of th' best shots in America, I reckon," drawled a voice behind him, and out of the underbrush sauntered a gangling figure with a squirrel rifle crotched in its arm— a moccasined figure, all muscle and whiskers and fringed buckskin.

WELL, Major Monroe recognized the figure as a famous frontiersman —maybe it was Dan'l Boone, or it might've been George Rogers Clark. At any rate it was a pioneer scout who'd been revisiting civilization in Virginia for a spell, and the major saw why all the bobcats, coon and 'possum had left the neighborhood.

He'd heard of these famous hunters who could shoot, at half a mile, a running deer. But he'd never before met one, and his mouth stayed agape in admiration.

"That was a wonderful shot, sir." He had to applaud. "Is it true that you frontiersmen can kill a deer at half a mile?"

"Half a mile!" The woodsman chuckled. "At half a mile I c'n knock the eye from a squirrel that's peeking around a tree."

Squinting into the distance, he flung up his gun—*bang!*—and nailed a critter so far off in the forest the major hadn't been able to see it. Sure enough, it was a red squirrel, and Dan'l Boone or George Rogers Clark or whoever it was hit him right in the eye.

"Shades of Caesar!" exclaimed Major Monroe. "I wish I could shoot like that."

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"Want to kill a deer at half a mile?" the other asked.

"A dog at ten paces!" the major declared. "Sir, maybe you can give me some pointers."

The buckskinned frontiersman allowed as maybe he could, although he didn't have much use for these near-to-the-target pistols. Monroe explained that the pistols were made for ten paces, and he displayed a few trick shots to show the frontiersman.

Then the frontiersman took the pistols and showed some trickier shots to Monroe. He asked Monroe to hold up a pinch of snuff, and he shot it right out from between his fingers without so much as scratching a finger-print. He drilled a bumblebee flying by; and then firing two pistols in a crossfire simultaneously, he made the bullets meet together in midair.

"Only trouble with these here pistols," he declared, "is that they haven't got the range for long-distance shots. Only a couple of men I ever heard of could nail an owl in a treetop with a pistol. One of them is Merriweather Lewis. But give me old Faithful." He slapped his long-barreled rifle.

Nevertheless he was good enough for Major Monroe with pistols, for the major wasn't out for any owl-shooting. He showed the major how to load and prime faster. How to squint a lot sharper through the sights. How to squeeze the trigger and not pull it. How to keep the recoil from throwing him off the mark.

Yes indeed, he gave the major the best coaching he'd ever had, and by the end of that afternoon James Monroe was twice as good a shot as he'd been before.

"Burr," he told his second, the night after that target-shooting lesson, "you can go tell the undertaker to make a special floral horseshoe. A big Gates Ajar with *Rest In Peace* done in funeral flowers. And the ribbon to say, *From James Monroe in Memory of Alexander Hamilton.*"

Aaron Burr smiled, wrapping himself in his black cloak, for he'd seen the major's latest shooting, and he was sure it could beat Hamilton's. Monroe was certain, too, after the marvelous coaching he'd had.

III

DAY before the duel he was up at sunrise, out in the fields practicing. He'd never been in better fettle, and he wished he'd brought someone with him to witness his style. That frontiersman's pointers had worked a big improvement, and the major told himself he'd been a dashed good marksman to start with.

Bang! Bang! Bang! He sure was shooting now. He hit a field rat at sixty-five feet from the hip, and just before breakfast he shot down a bumblebee.

Then down in the lower thirty acres he saw a scarecrow. It kind of looked like Alexander Hamilton— "That straw-stuffed nincompoop!"—and he walked over to the scarecrow and bowed formally with, "At your service, Mr. Hamilton!", and strode back twenty paces and shot the scarecrow square in the heart, just as he was going to tomorrow.

Twenty times he paced off the distance, practiced spinning and firing, first right hand, then left hand, going through all the formality of the code. Each time he hit the scarecrow plunk in the heart.

That was pretty bull's-eye shooting, thought Major Monroe.

He was so engrossed with his practicing that he didn't see the Gypsy. Not until she was fair on top of him. She'd been coming across the field in a little two-wheeled cart, a foreign kind of cart with a queer round-topped roof, pulled by a melancholy foreign little donkey. There was a back door to the cart and a funny little step, and on each sidewall of the cart there was painted a huge brown hand.

The Gypsy was brown, too. Old and brown and all bent over with a face like a wrinkled walnut. Her hands were like twigs and she had three horsehair whiskers on her chin. But her earrings were big as brass hoops, and her patched dress was bright as autumn color.

She halted the funny cart on the path

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behind James Monroe, and she sat there watching him duel the scarecrow, nodding to herself, never making a sound. It gave him sort of a turn when he wheeled around and saw her there.

"What's this? What's this?" The major was uncomfortable under those beady black eyes. "You've been watching me shoot, old woman?"

"Aye," she answered in a voice at least familiar to the scarecrow. "I've been watching ye shoot, my master."

"And do you like it?" Major Monroe asked her, disturbed for some reason he couldn't explain.

"Aye, I like it fine," was the toneless answer. "Only I've been wondering, master. Wondering—"

"Wondering what?" demanded Major Monroe, not fancying the way her voice trailed off. It was still early in the morning, and he'd had no breakfast yet, and there was a stillness and mistiness on the field.

"Wondering if it was good enough," was the croaky answer. "Wondering if it was good enough for the moment in which you might need it, my master."

"Hey? Well, it's a whole lot better than I'll ever need," said Major Monroe, getting hot. "Where have you seen better pistoling than this in your travels? Certainly it's good enough, old woman, and better than I'll ever find necessary."

"As to that, there's only one way to tell," said the Gypsy. "There's only one way to find the answer to that, my master."

"In a contest," said the major hotly, "with something besides a scarecrow."

But the old woman shook her head. "By that time it may be too late."

"How then? demanded Major Monroe, not liking the Gypsy or her talk or anything else that might unsettle him at a time like this. "If not in actual contest, what's the only way to tell?"

For reply the old woman pointed to the painting on the side of the wagon, and the major found himself glaring at the big hand.

"Well, I'm demmed!" he said, inadvertently thrusting out his own, as if expecting to see something written there.

The old Gypsy woman looked down at his defiant palm. She hooked her finger over her nose and stared like an eagle with a talon hooked over its beak.

"You've an interesting palm, James Monroe," she whispered. "The most interesting palm and most revealing palm I've seen in all my many years as a fortune teller."

"Is that so?" The major glared, surprised that she should know his name. "Tell me more."

"THE lines are like those of a book." The old Gypsy woman's black eyes glittered. "Like those of a book, James Monroe, and it's quite a story there. That line, now, under the heel of your thumb" —she traced it on his palm with a long, crooked fingernail—"I see you're going to fight a duel, James Monroe."

"What else can you see?" The major was pretty startled.

"The future I can see," the old Gypsy whispered, leaning down. "The future, and your future written there in the palm of your hand. There's history in your palm, James Monroe, American history. It all depends on tomorrow, and the answer to that is in your life-line."

Tomorrow. His life-line. James Monroe couldn't help but swallow. "Can you see the outcome of my duel with Hamilton?" he asked.

The old woman peered and peered and squinted her gimlet eyes. "I could see a lot better," she said hoarsely, "if I clutched a piece of silver in my own palm."

"Here's a sovereign," said Major Monroe. "You ought to see aplenty clutching gold."

The old Gypsy's eyes gleamed like a spirit's at that, and it seemed as if she could peer through the major's palm as if it were made of glass.

"Aye, I do see better. I see a great deal. I see you going to the dueling ground, James Monroe, with a dark handsome man as your second. I see your antagonist ap-

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proaching, walking with confident step. You're an expert shot and so is he, James Monroe—by the saints, you are evenly matched.

"You bow. You choose your weapons from the case. You wheel and pace off. And then—"

"And then?" The major's voice was a little husky.

The Gypsy woman was tracing his life-line with her fingernail. James Monroe could feel that light scratching go right down his spine.

"The umpire calls, 'Ready!'" she whispered. "The umpire calls, 'Aim!' The umpire calls, 'Fire!'"

She broke off with an in-pulled breath, drew Monroe's palm within two inches of her eyes, then sent a swift stare across the field at the scarecrow.

"What's the matter?" Monroe jerked back his hand. "What in heaven's name do you see?"

"History," the old woman whispered, gazing at him like one in a trance. "A world-shaking event in American history. The fate and future of your nation may rest on the outcome of tomorrow's duel, James Monroe.

"But I can't believe my eyes—no, I can't be sure. I can't be sure of the outcome till I compare your palm with the mystic chart. Come into the wagon, James Monroe."

She held aside the door-flap, beckoning; "Come where we may compare by the mystic chart."

Well, he didn't believe in such claptrap, but just the same it shook him a little. How would this old Gypsy woman know his name? How'd she know about the duel in the first place? She looked as if she'd come in her donkey-cart straight from Romany—maybe by an incantation, for she had that look about her—and he didn't like the strange stare she'd given that scarecrow.

More than reluctant, he climbed up into the cart, impelled by something he couldn't seem to control. Inside it was dark and smelly with a lot of strange smells he'd never experienced before—roots and herbs and musty blankets and things like that.

There was a stuffed mole on the table and a bottle of something that looked like cat's blood. A strange Aladdin-like lamp gave off a queerish dim light, and there was a big charted palm on the wall—an outlined hand all marked up with numerals and lines and Gypsy characters.

"And now," said the old brown woman with the face like a walnut between huge brass earrings—and the glitter of her eyes like midnight witch-shine!— "I'll read your palm, Major James Monroe!"

Ten minutes later, when he left the wagon, he had the look on his face of a man in death, and he walked across the fields like a corpse on the way to its funeral. His hands were shaking and his forehead was mossy green and the sweat ran down his features like melting candle-wax.

"I've got to stop it!" he was moaning to himself. "They'll brand me as a coward. They'll say I was afraid. After all the things I've said—and me sending him the challenge! But somehow—somehow I've got to stop that duel."

NOW duels are like wars—it's a whole lot easier to start one than to stop one. They're all bound up with tradition and code, and to begin with they're a matter of high honor.

Of course they aren't today because we live in our modern world differently; but they were back then when America took its dueling seriously and men challenged each other at the drop of an insult or a hat.

Major Monroe was on the spot—on a terrible spot. If he went through with the duel he'd go to—well, he didn't like to think about it. But if he didn't go through with it, he'd arrive in something worse than Hell: loss of face, dishonor, the catcalls of his enemies, the scorn of his friends.

Jehu! He'd be blackballed. They'd drum him out of the regiment. And what a jeer-

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ing smearing he'd get from Alexander Hamilton.

Locking himself in his house and telling the servants he'd see nobody, he paced the floor. Pacing, he groaned like a soul in travail. How could he find a way out?

He *had* to find a way out! Lord, he'd rather drink himself to death on Vermont vinegar than crawl before Alexander Hamilton. He'd rather go to that field and die—but he just couldn't die!

"And I've got to go on living," he groaned, walking up and down. "I've got to stop the duel and go on living. In every one of the Thirteen States I'll be branded for cowardice. Me! Major James Monroe!

"They'll say I was afraid to fight Hamilton. They'll say I was afraid to die." He put his face in his hands, and the tears came out through his fingers. "And I am afraid to die." He sobbed. "I can't die. I can't! Ah, why did I see that Gypsy woman? I want to die, and I can't."

That's a pretty bad position to be in—when you want to die and can't. Right then James Monroe wished he were dead and buried. He wished he had never lived to see that Gypsy fortune-teller. He wished a cannon-ball at White Plains or Trenton had taken off his hand.

Cursing blue oaths through a mist of anguish, he glared at his offending palm. He couldn't doubt the lines the old Gypsy woman had read there. His past she had told him in wizardish detail: intimate little episodes of his boyhood; things about his parents; his Scotch ancestry; how he was wounded at the Battle of Trenton; how he went to William and Mary College and studied law under Jefferson; the date of his birth, April 28, 1758; about his quarrels in the Senate with Hamilton.

When she read his past like that, he couldn't doubt her reading of his future! It was right there in his hand, she said—right there on the palm of his hand. Perspiration broke out all over again on his forehead as he thought of her scratchy fingernail, her beady clairvoyant eyes.

"Behold!" she had croaked. "There it is, my master. Compare it with the charted palm on the wall. You observe how the life-line—"

The life-line, yes. And that charted hand on the wall. James Monroe clenched his palm into a fist and walked up and down.

"I've got to stop the duel. Somehow I've got to stop the duel."

But he couldn't stop it. It was too late. The clock on the stair was ticking the time away. Besides, you couldn't call off a duel after you'd challenged. In the tight little society of early America it just wasn't done.

He'd be a laughing-stock. Dishonored. What would Aaron Burr say? And Franklin's *Saturday Evening Post?* Gad, they'd ride him out of the county on a rail.

Well, for a minute he thought of committing suicide, and he fetched out his pistols and cocked one at his head. But his hand was shaking so he'd probably have missed; and besides he couldn't do it, for if he wasn't able to face death on the dueling ground, neither was he able to commit suicide. No, that exit was closed to him, too. Only way out was to somehow stop the duel.

"God, if Hamilton would only back down. Hamilton—"

He pulled up short with a gasp. That would be an out. If Alexander Hamilton—

Major Monroe shook his head at the hopelessness. Not Hamilton. Not a chance. As well expect an apology from the Great Stone Face. As well expect a statue of Caesar to back down out of the Coliseum.

Hamilton was granite. Hamilton was a mule. Hamilton never backed down from anything. Ruffian he might be, but nobody ever suspected his nerve. The man was stubborn as a rock, and besides—besides, he was confident of winning.

No, Hamilton wouldn't back down.

Major Monroe, drowning, let go of that straw; but, going down for the third time, he grabbed it again. It was his only chance, and he was desperate. His only possible way out. The only answer that could keep him alive and at the same time save his honor. If Hamilton somehow

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would back down! If he only would. . . .

In his desperation he thought for a moment of going to Hamilton, but that wouldn't do. He couldn't go to Hamilton. The man would think he was crawling—just wouldn't believe—

"I can't go to see him. I can't let him know. The offer must come from him. Somehow I must make *him* call it off. If he could be made to back down, somehow! If I could only scare him—"

The major shocked to a standstill. Scare Hamilton? He was made of iron. But there might be a chance—James Monroe clutched his forehead—one spider-thread thin chance.

"Sweet Land of Liberty! It might work. Lord, it would be enough to scare anybody. By Heaven, it's my only possible chance."

Grabbing up pistols and hat, he rushed out of the house and raced for the woods. Time was running like sand from an hour-glass, and he had to find that frontiersman!

IV

IT MIGHT'VE been Daniel Boone and it might've been George Rogers Clark; but whoever it was, it was one of those pioneer sharpshooters passing a week-end in the neighborhood, and James Monroe found him because he had to find him.

All buckskin and whiskers and coon-skin cap, he was wrapped up in his deer-hide sleeping bag when the major came on him at moonrise in the forest, and the major woke him up with a Choctaw yell.

It didn't take him five seconds to explain the situation; and that frontiersman, mighty impressed, said he sure understood.

"Helluva fix, all right," he agreed, plenty soberly, scratching in his backwoods whiskers. "Looks to me like yore twixt the devil an' the deep blue sea. But I'd do anything for my country, young feller, which means I'll do anything for you. Say the word, and I'll shore lend you a hand."

"It's your trigger-finger I want you to lend," said James Monroe, breathing hard. I'd say it was about the best shot in the world. Am I right?"

"Possible exception of Merriwether Lewis an' maybe one or two others," was the modest answer. "I do aim to be something of a sharpshooter. But my specialty ain't white men," he added dubiously. "Injuns is my specialty. An' squirrels, an' b'ar, an' hoot owls."

"It's a hoot owl I want," said Major Monroe. "Do you think you could hit another hooter, say at five hundred paces? A big old hoot owl peeking around a high pine, especially if it was up there tied?"

"Five hundred paces? A-roostin' in a high pine? Tied?" The frontiersman laughed. "Young feller, if I had a shootin' iron powerful enough with sights that'd carry that far, I c'd hit such a bull's-eye at five hundred miles! But what's a tied ole hoot owl peekin' around a treetop to do with—"

"You're to be ambushed in the underbrush," said James Monroe, husky. "I'll be coming up the path. Other end of the path, there's swaggering Alec Hamilton. 'Look,' I'll say offhand to my second. 'Look, Burr, do you see that peekin' owl up there? Well, I don't want him witnessing the duel,' I'll say. And with that, I'll raise my pistol up and fire."

"Think ye can hit him?" the woodsman was anxious. "That's a mighty impossible kind of shot for a duelling pistol."

Major James Monroe shook his head. "When I fire, you're to fire simultaneously," he said softly. "It'll be a snap of a shot for you, like hitting the broadside of a barn. But I want to make sure that bird is hit so's the bullet cuts the string around its collar and brings it tumbling down.

"That's where you come in," he said softly. "And if the gods are with me, that's where Hamilton goes out."

WELL, it was beautifully arranged, and it seemed like a beautiful morning was part of the arrangement.

James Monroe had never seen a finer sunrise. The sky was clean and cool azure

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all the way from the Potomac to the Blue Ridge Mountains; there was a tang and a ping to the atmosphere; the air was soft as silk, and way down some cornfield a black man was pickin' a banjo—the finest kind of morning in Virginia.

Major Monroe was up at cockcrow, and Aaron Burr was on hand with the rooster. The doctor rode up, somber with his bag of medications, and crack of dawn the party started off over the fields where the larks were swooping and the copses still dewy and dark and the hollows still filled with floating pools of mist.

Aaron Burr walked ahead, carrying the pistol case, a smile on his handsome features exactly like a gleam from dark mahogany. James Monroe walked last, hat-brim down, hands clenched at sides, wondering over and over again, "Will it work?"

Nearer they got to the dueling ground, the surer he was it wouldn't, and the sweat began to mingle with the dew on his forehead. His heart was pounding in his chest like a drum, and he whistled, off-key but loud, *The Girl I Left Behind Me*, for fear the others would hear it.

"That's the spirit," Burr smiled back once. "You can't lose, Major. God's truth, I've wagered a hundred pounds at Fraunce's that Hamilton never walks back from this morning."

The major's whistle screeled off like a spittle-stuck fife, but he answered something or other, glad of a shadowy thicket where they couldn't see his forehead. It was the longest walk he'd ever made—to that dueling ground. Longer than the retreat-march with Washington to White Plains.

But they got there finally, just as his legs felt like giving out, and then he knew what it was like when a man finally saw the gallows. It was a beautiful field—a broad green square of grassy carpet, all hemmed in on four sides with locusts, laurel-brush and boskage; a willow grove at the far end where a man might lie down on moss; and overshadowing the smooth green lawn, a tall Virginia pine going straight up to the blue.

A path approached the green carpet from the south, and a path approached the green carpet from the north. Moving up the path from the south, in the silence of early morning with the mists rising, James Monroe thought it was like a curtain going up on the scene of a play.

His pulse was hammering like a blacksmith's maul, and he looked around, secretly fearful, hunting the frontiersman. Matter of fact, the fellow was practically on top of him before he appeared—those woodsmen could melt into ambush like that.

Out of the bushes came the sharpshooter's wink; and looking up, far ahead in the high pine tree, James Monroe finally spotted the owl.

Same time, at just that minute, he spied Alexander Hamilton coming. He was coming down the path out of the north. Even at that distance Major Monroe could see the confidence in Alexander Hamilton. Head up. Hat cocked. Shoulders jaunty.

The undergrowth along the path came as high as his shoulders, and he looked like a bust, proud and smiling—a granite-chinned bust on its way to the Hall of Fame. His seconds were a good distance behind him; and James Monroe thought bitterly how it was like the man to show off by walking forward to the combat alone.

"Confound him," the major gritted. "He's certain he's going to win."

WATCHING that cocky head and shoulders come jaunting toward him through the underbrush made the sweat-globes swell on the major's forehead. Jehu! his stomach felt like gelatine. He was glad his own path was high-hedged with elderberry, for his knees were shivering.

It wasn't fear that shivered them, though, so much as rage. Rage that he couldn't take his chances at ten paces. Rage that he didn't dare defy the fortune-telling of that old Gypsy; that he daren't go forward and risk his life against this adversary like a gentleman.

He had an impulse to carry on and duel,

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but it turned his marrow cold. He couldn't risk it. He couldn't take that chance with American history.

Everything now depended on the whim of a dice-throw. He was hanging on his life-line, and his life-line now was a mere wisp of thread.

"Burr," he called hoarsely, choking to get it out. "Look, Burr, do you see that peekin' owl up there?"

He made sure his voice carried through the misty stillness to that figure approaching on the opposite path, and he pointed at the pine to indicate the bird's-eye.

Aaron Burr halted just as James Monroe had wanted him to, shading his eyes with a hand and looking up.

"Well, I don't want him witnessing the duel!" James Monroe said, hoarse and loud, moving forward to take a pistol from the case, exaggerating nonchalance and off-hand.

Corner of his eye he could see Alec Hamilton had paused, way the other side of the tree, and Major Monroe jelled to stockstill, and raising the pistol to shoulder-height above the underbrush so Hamilton could see it, he aimed at the pine-top and drew a bead.

This was history's moment.

Both he and Hamilton were equidistant from the dueling ground, about five hundred yards from the tree.

The major pulled an icy breath. Glory! his hand was shaking so he couldn't have hit a haystack at three paces, and he knew right then that if the trick didn't work, that Gypsy's prophecy would surely come true.

Aaron Burr and the doctor were staring up at the pine-top. Hamilton was staring up at the pine-top. James Monroe's eyes blurred; when he pulled the trigger he couldn't even see the owl.

Bang!

In the stillness it was like a doom-crack; and the echoes went clapping and clapping, far off to the Blue Ridge foothills.

He heard Burr cry, "Jehu! what a shot!" and he opened his eyes just as the hoot owl started to fall. But he didn't look at the owl. He looked at Alexander Hamilton looking at the owl.

From the highest limb that hoot owl came down through the pine cones—*blippety-blip-blip-blip* — and Alexander Hamilton's upturned stare was following it down. And Hamilton's stare was just as owlish as the bird's.

Off the bottommost limb it gave an acrobatic little flip, and Hamilton's eyes watched it hit the ground. It seemed to James Monroe as if Alexander wasn't smiling any more, and he breathed a "Thank God the frontiersman didn't miss!"

That woodsman must've fired on the very simultaneous tick, for the squirrel-rifle hadn't missed by a split second on the echo, and it was a marvelous sharp-shooting shot.

Now it all depended on Hamilton, and James Monroe didn't dare trust his eyeballs. For Hamilton, on that path over there, had halted. Halted and turned, waiting for the arrival of his seconds. His seconds came breasting through the undergrowth, and then James Monroe could see them gathered in consultation with their heads together.

HE HEARD a hissy exclamation from Aaron Burr. A mutter of surprise from the doctor. Scenery swam on his vision, and then, when his focus cleared again, there was Hamilton marching out across the dueling ground—marching forward alone.

Midway across the greensward, Alexander Hamilton stopped. In the shadow of the tall Virginia pine. Right beside the dead owl.

James Monroe could see the man's square Scotch jaw. His lips were fixed expressionless, and his face looked bleak and cold. Standing there on the field of honor, he faced James Monroe's stalled party. He swept off his hat, and bowed.

"Major Monroe!" and his voice sounded queerly tight. "Might I have words with you a moment, Major Monroe?"

Walking out to meet the man, James Monroe's legs felt stiff as wood.

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"At your service, Alexander Hamilton."

"James Monroe," said Hamilton, chewing the words as if they tasted chalky, "I came here to give you satisfaction. But a duel with you, sir, would be just plain murder. Don't you think that such a murder would be downright un-American?"

"Perhaps it would, sir!" agreed James Monroe, trying not to blurt. He kept his eyes downfixed at the bird. "And what might you suggest?"

"I suggest an apology," said Alexander Hamilton, "and under the circumstances, knowing you as I do, I'm quite prepared to make it. Whatever I've said, James Monroe, I've never said you weren't American and a hero. You're a brave man, James Monroe, and you'll do a lot for this country."

But it was James Monroe's face that was flushing red, and it took an effort to raise his eyes. "Hamilton," he said thickly, "it's you that's owed the apology. For you're brave enough to have risked being called a coward, and it's the highest kind of courage that faces up to such a charge. You're an honest man and a brave man, too brave to fear being called afraid. Will you take my hand, Alexander Hamilton?"

And they were shaking hands in the sunshine when Aaron Burr in his black cloak, scowling, left the field.

V

THAT'S all there is to the story—except this. Back at the house, where he locked up the pistol-case, there was a tap at Major James Monroe's door. It might've been George Rogers Clark or it might've been Dan'l Boone, but whoever it was, the whiskery, buckskinned frontiersman with his long-barreled shooting iron was there.

"Man!" said the young major, grabbing the frontiersman by the shoulders, "that was a wonderful shot! Whatever I've got is yours, for I owe you my life, and it seems that American history should put up a monument to a hoot owl."

"But I didn't shoot him," the frontiersman drawled, spitting a ploop of tobacco juice that lit in James Monroe's fireplace like a wet bomb. "Naw sir, Major, you must've shot the critter yourself."

"I?" James Monroe gasped. "Why, my aim was shaking so I couldn't have hit a petrified elephant. What the devil can you mean, you didn't sharpshoot that bird!"

The frontiersman shook his head. "'Twasn't me," he declared, "cuz my shootin' iron didn't fire. I had 'er all primed an' ready, waitin' since midnight out there in that bush-patch. Just afore daybreak, I left the gun a-lyin' in the blind, and walked over to the pine tree to make sure th' hoot owl was still up there where I'd tied him. Came back an' picked up old Faithful, lyin' where I'd left her, an' waited for th' show to come along. But, by cracky, when I took aim an' fired, the trigger just clicked."

Mystified, the woodsman shook his head. "Naw sir, the gun wasn't loaded!"

So Major James Monroe stared blank-faced at the old frontiersman, and the old frontiersman stared blank-faced at Major James Monroe. And slowly a very strange look came on James Monroe's stunned face.

"Man!" he whispered. "You don't think—but the bushes were up to his shoulders; he might have had a pistol in his hand!" and James Monroe's eyes were staring blue. "You don't think Alexander Hamilton—"

And that's the story. That Hamilton, firing from the hip to display his own marksmanship—Hamilton, himself, killed the hoot owl. It would've been like Alexander Hamilton, say he noticed the shake in James Monroe's unsteady aim. Like Alexander Hamilton to snipe that target, himself—he was a pretty fine marksman, remember—and then, shocked by his own expert sharpshooting, to refuse to walk out and murder a fellow man.

And everybody knows how Alexander Hamilton shot in the air at duels. Everybody knows how he shot in the air that bloody dawn years later at Weehawken when Aaron Burr was his opponent—shot

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in the air just one second before dark Aaron's venomous bullet struck him to his death.

Who unloaded the old frontiersman's squirrel-rifle? Well, this is only a story and maybe he forgot to load it himself. But Burr had always hated Hamilton, and maybe, on his way to Major Monroe's house before cockcrow, passing the dueling ground and seeing the frontiersman and the tied owl—suspecting . . .

Yes, suspecting; and wanting Hamilton dead, not alive and scared. . . .

Yet many of our patriot forefathers had tempers like to kill each other. They took their politics seriously in those days, and a fortune-teller, if there were such things, could've read some astounding histories in their palms. Take that future in the palm of James Monroe!

Four years in the Senate. American Minister to France.

American envoy to England. Governor of Virginia.

Secretary of State under Madison.

President of the United States—1817-'25.

AND then the Monroe Doctrine—that *Keep Out!* sign to the lusting powers of Europe—that stay-away warning to the Holy Alliance that the Americas wanted no interference from the governments of Europe which were certainly in alliance but not holy.

Did the old Gypsy woman read that in his palm? How the European monarchies planned to break up the American republics? How they would join together with so-called heavenly blessings to stamp out liberalism and wipe Democracy from our Hemisphere?

All that was in the future for James Monroe's Presidency; his Doctrine was to save the Americas from that fate—and certainly he wouldn't dare to die before he composed that Doctrine!

It may be a forune-teller could have seen all that, and the fact that a man was going to be killed if he fought a certain duel.

And for those who don't believe in palmistry, it might be that an old Gypsy woman had been hired by James Monroe's far-seeing friends—hired by some man like Thomas Jefferson, who knew the young major's past and could well imagine the future—hired to prophesy to hot-headed James Monroe and convince him he must not fight that duel.

We know he didn't kill Hamilton, and we know Alexander Hamilton didn't kill him. And if an old Gypsy woman could be really clairvoyant, that palmist could have foretold another interesting fact to James Monroe. He was to be the third American founder, patriot and President to die on Independence Day, following Thomas Jefferson and John Adams.

James Monroe—July 4th, 1831.

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (ADV.)

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Upset in Utopia

"What's yours?" Steve suggested pleasantly as the dock worker started over the bar. "A large brandy?"

By D. L. AMES

Foreword

So you never heard of San Utopia, that fine Riviera spot in the republic of Valparadiso? Nor of Valparadiso? Nor yet the neighboring states of Santo Perfidio, which Valparadiso fought in the past, and Gran Frijole, which Valparadiso is slated to fight in the very near future?

No matter. We guarantee that these are not the names of any states, living or dead; and that any reference to certain exisitng nations (guess who) is made with malice aforethought and is thus purely coincidental.

Maybe these things all happened, somewhere, in that comparatively happy time Before Blitzkrieg. Maybe they're still happening, in places where free men still have their backs a few feet from the wall.

But as for this story itself—try to take it in the spirit of good clean fun. That's what we wish there were more of, these days. . . .

CHAPTER I

HONEYMOON IN PARADISO

ON THE face of it San Utopia—bijou resort of Valparadiso—seemed a rather extraordinary place for Steve and Judy Brabazon to spend their honeymoon. Since there is only one thing to do in San Utopia—namely to play roulette in the Casino; and since roulette (among other more reckless forms of gambling) was Steve's chief joy and passion, Judy felt not unreasonably aggrieved.

The excitable crowd of gamblers who jostled round them hardly fitted in with Judy's idea of that romantic solitude appropriate to honeymoons.

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She edged a little forward in her chair to avoid the tea planter from Ceylon who was breathing tensely down her back. She leaned toward her husband. Her voice was as sweet as an acid drop:

"What I love is all this privacy and quiet we're getting, Steve darling."

But her remark was drowned by the roar of the croupiers, announcing that Number Fifteen—black—had just won: and to Steve Brabazon these mysterious shouts were pure music.

Not only because he himself had just bet on Fifteen and black and in the process won about ten thousand pesos; but because they were gamblers' jargon. And next to Judy, Steve loved all and everything connected with gambling.

Gambling was in his blood, and as a matter of fact he sometimes gambled for far higher stakes than were allowed in the Casino. On more than one occasion he had, on the flimsiest of chances, staked his life.

Which is possibly what made him one of the most useful men in the British Secret Service, whose little boys seem to get everywhere.

As for Steve's finances they were likely to be interesting, rather than sound.

HE PATTED Judy's arm absentmindedly with his right hand and with his left raked in a handsome pile of cash. With a wistful sigh he remembered that he was now a married man and must be careful of his money. So he risked only a little more than half his worldly goods on the next spin of the wheel.

Judy watched him affectionately. She liked the unruly mop of sandy hair which fell from his high intelligent forehead, the big engaging mouth which grinned with good humor easily and frequently.

There was an awkward grace in the way he sprawled his long, loose-jointed frame against the roulette table, a lazy deliberation about his movements which reminded Judy of a man-eating tiger in an amiable mood.

Unlike the average stranger she was undeceived by Steve's harmless, easy-going manner with all the sundry. For she had seen Steve in action. It was a sight worth seeing.

Judy slipped her hand into Steve's at the thought and her heart warmed to his faint answering pressure. Love, she decided, was okay.

Then something disturbed the sweet serenity of this picture of married happiness.

The something was the entry of Viki Lamarr.

Viki entered the roulette salon graciously, as if she were doing the place a favor. She paused for a brief moment in the door, as if waiting for the applause.

As a matter of fact she nearly got it. For Viki Lamarr was a blonde plus. Even Judy had to admit that she had that little extra something which makes all the difference.

She was tall, slim and supple. Her hair, the color of pale honey, fell in loose waves to her gleaming shoulders. Her lips were a wide slightly-drooping cupid's bow which gave her the appearance of a lovely but rather spoiled child, and aroused fatherly (among other) instincts in he heart of every man over fifty in the room. Viki was spoiled, but she was no child.

Her eyes, which slanted faintly, were tantalizing pools of mystery and promise, surprisingly dark. Surprising, that is, to the innocent male who assumed from the color of her hair that she had started life as a blonde.

Judy, like the other women present, knew perfectly well that much of the glamour of this gorgeous creature came from bottles and cosmetic pots. But she also acknowledged that no bottles or cosmetic pots had ever had such a magnificent effect upon herself.

But Judy was being very unfair to herself. For to anybody with a reasonable taste in women—which included Steve himself—she was easily the prettiest woman in the room.

Viki's flamboyant beauty, however, caused a bit of a sensation. Elderly women stared at her through their lorgnettes, and

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then stared pointedly away. The tea planter standing behind Judy's chair began breathing still more heavily and totally forgot about the ten francs he had just lost on the Number Eleven. Even the croupiers started showing off.

STEVE BRABAZON'S reaction was less apparent. Judy saw his blue eyes narrow lazily. He was in the process of placing a pile of a hundred pesos on Number Twenty-six.

But Judy noticed that he did not place the money in the exact center of Number Twenty-six, a fact which suggested that his mind was elsewhere.

It was. It was occupied, as Judy knew only too well with this same Miss Viki Lamarr. But it was occupied with an aspect of Miss Lamarr which had nothing to do with her sex appeal.

Steve's mind had been thus occupied ever since last night when he had observed a certain little peculiarity in Miss Lamarr's system of gambling. It had filled him with an overwhelming desire to know much more about the fascinating Viki.

He knew already what all the rest of San Utopia knew about her. He had heard it from her own sweet lips last night at the Sporting Club over half a bottle of champagne, having first performed a lightning pick-up while Judy was spending her usual four or five hours powdering her nose.

It was a sad, sad story, and Viki had laid it on thick. She was Polish or Moravian or Bohemian or something—in any case a gallant little refugee who had escaped from the Nazi horror with her virtue (the statement was her own) and practically nothing else.

What she thought of Hitler and his boy friends was accurate, but not printable. Steve got the idea. She didn't like them.

Viki's was a pathetic tale of hardship, calculated to wring the sympathetic heart of any man—the story of a lone girl's struggle, far from her native shores, against a tough world.

On the other hand a string of priceless pearls and a chinchilla fur coat seemed to suggest that she was bearing up nicely. She was a brave little thing, roughing it so cheerfully in San Utopia on champagne and oysters, with only a small Rolls Royce to take her around.

Steve was touched. His heart was torn at this pathetic victim of the Nazis. "We must be nice to her," he had said to Judy, "poor homeless, friendless child."

Judy's reply showed what *she* thought of Viki. "Nerts," she had murmured briefly.

Tonight Viki Lamarr looked more than ever breath-taking. She had changed into a simple little Chanel frock which must have cost somebody three or four hundred U. S. dollars, but was almost worth it. The designer, doubtless in the cause of war-time economy, had skimped the material here and there so that all doubt about the perfection of Viki's lovely body was removed.

The tall, distinguished man from Gran Frijole who sat next to Steve and Judy paused in the act of lighting his excellent cigar as he saw her. Don Aldo Francesco del Ortini knew as much about women as he did about cigars. His face lit up in frank admiration of this enchanting vision of luscious womanhood.

Delicately he flicked a bit of ash from the lapel of his faultlessly cut tail coat.

"Oh, mammie! Wrap me up that one!" he remarked to no one in particular. "That baby's got everything. Everything," he added sadly, "except morals."

The Don's words were perhaps less elegant than his appearance. Unhappily this last of the distinguished line of the Ortinis considered himself an artist in American slang. And it was true that he had learned to speak English in the East Side slum of New York where his father and mother had owned a very prosperous little banana stall. But speech has a way of changing, and the Don's memory of what he had learned was, at best, confused.

His complaint about Viki came straight from the heart. And, elegant or not, it was about right. The Don knew his Viki. In fact Viki was his boss.

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SHE did not, however, betray by the bat of an eyeball that she had ever seen him before as she took her place beside the croupier.

Don Aldo turned from admiration of Viki to his fragrant cigar. His dark eyes lingered wistfully for a moment on the fresh, pretty profile of Judy's face, then a little doubtfully on the tough jaw of Judy's husband. Then with a sigh he renewed the study of his beautifully manicured finger nails.

Steve meanwhile had continued in his lavish way to invest the Brabazon fortunes. The pile of money in front of him melted, grew again and wavered. Retired bankers watched him play in fascinated horror. An American girl screamed with excitement when he won on three successive spins, on Numbers One, Two and Three.

Judy alone realized that his heart wasn't in it. She saw his glance stray frequently across the table to Viki Lamarr.

Viki hadn't done badly for herself. Her admirers at the moment consisted of a Valparadisan admiral, a brigadier general, and Señor Bulbo, the tiny diplomat from Gran Frijole, said to be visiting Valparadiso to further friendlier trade relations between the two countries.

Stepping down in the social scale a bit, there was also Test Pilot Carlos del Toro, of the Valparadisan air force, son of Alfredo del Toro, the famous ace of the late war with Santo Perfidio.

Carlos del Toro stood a few feet behind Viki's chair, holding her fur coat and looking rather down at the mouth. Rumor said that he was wildly in love with the charming refugee, and rumor had put it mildly. Carlos had it badly.

For he was normally a pleasant-looking young man with frank cheerful features; but a few weeks of Viki had turned him into something resembling a mournful haddock stranded in the Sahara Desert.

At first she had been kindness itself. She had even taken an interest in his work —especially his work in connection with the new airdrome at Calle del Cielo a few miles north of San Utopia—the airdrome that hid several of Valparadiso's secrets.

Then one evening when he had quietly pointed out that he really ought not to talk so much about his job at the airdrome she had somehow taken offense. Since that time she had scarcely been civil. He had tried orchids, the threat of suicide, a new kind of brilliantine. The lady's temperature remained only a few degrees above that of liquid air. Carlos just couldn't understand it.

"That floozie ought to have her pants spanked," murmured Don Aldo, who believed in fair play when he didn't have to do the playing. "No dame ought to lead a guy up the garden path and get away with it!" He felt warmly on the subject, having made an unsuccessful pass or two at Viki himself.

STEVE eyed Viki's party casually, waving breezily as he caught her glance. Viki's dark tawny eyes rested for a moment on Steve. They were expressive, challenging. Translated the message of her glance said: "Perhaps." Steve went on better by winking broadly.

"I think what they fall for," Judy suggested helpfully, "is the charm of your old-world manners."

Steve trod gently on her foot. "I have an idea," he said softly, "that little Viki is something special in the spy line. I'm going to do a spot of snooping."

"That's exactly what I was afraid of," Judy sighed.

But Steve was gone. She saw him elbow his way through the seething mob of expensive humanity until he reappeared at the other side of the table.

Judy's heartbeat quickened, and the first, faint dawning of promised adventure glowed in her amber eyes. She amused herself by losing as much of Steve's money as she could in his absence, but her suppressed excitement shone in the two stabs of crimson which heightened the vivid coloring of her cheeks.

She watched Steve, his hands in his pockets, whistling, approach Viki's chair. She hoped that her interest in the pro-

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ceedings would look like simple jealousy.

Don Aldo Francesco del Ortini, who prided himself on his knowledge of women, assumed that she was jealous. He leaned toward her.

"Listen, sister," he said politely in his best pidgin American, "make your boy friend lay off that Lamarr dame. I'm giving you the low-down. She's poison."

Judy looked at the Don as if she'd never seen him before and didn't think much of him now that she had. "I don't think I know you," she said, "but you seem to be a person of extremely sound judgment."

The Don withdrew, baffled and confused. English dames, he remembered regretfully, not only talked in a way you couldn't understand, but they were snooty. And all he'd wanted was to do her a favor.

But Steve did not join the big shots who made up Viki's bodyguard. He hung around the outskirts. Perhaps he only wanted a better view of her back. A reasonable conjecture. Viki's back was worth looking at.

Actually Steve's interest was only to see whether Viki was still faithful to the curious system of gambling she had followed last night.

It was a system to which he had given much thought. It consisted of waiting for the ball to come to rest, jotting down a number in the little booklet provided by the Casino management, placing a modest hundred francs apparently at random, and then ditto all over again.

Half the serious gamblers in the San Utopia Casino faithfully jotted down numbers in their little booklets after each spin of the wheel. They worked out, thus, a system of gambling that was to make their fortunes. The management encouraged them, even supplying free pencils. Needless to say, none of the systems ever worked.

But Viki's system was new to Steve. The Casino was full of mildly insane people; but even these generally wrote down either the number that had actually turned up, or at least the one which they themselves had bet on.

Viki did neither. She struck out on an entirely fresh line of her own. She simply jotted down any number which came into her head—or so it seemed at first glance.

Maybe Viki didn't understand the game of roulette and just wished to keep up appearance. Maybe she had no head for figures. Or maybe—and this was the angle which made Steve curious—she was up to something fishy.

HE WHISTLED a bar or two of that vigorous old English ballad, *She Was Poor but She was Honest,* and practiced tossing a coin so that it came up heads or tails as he wished.

Viki placed fifty francs on Number Four. The ball settled and the croupier called Number Thirty. Viki, in her little book, promptly jotted down Eleven.

Steve began the second stanza of *She Was Poor but She Was Honest,* where the ballad begins to warm up.

Viki backed again on Number Four. Number Five won, and Viki, original as ever, wrote down Twenty-six.

At that moment Steve had an idea. For somebody else had certainly punted on Twenty-six, even if Viki hadn't! Steve watched the croupier rake in the lone ten francs which had been placed there.

In other words Viki was jotting down the record of somebody else's bets. But whose? Steve scanned the sea of faces which crowded round the table. Any one of them might have bet on Twenty-six. His suspects had to include the lot.

Viki, obviously a girl with a purpose in life, bet for the third time on Number Four. The winning number was Thirty-five, and Steve stopped breathing. For Viki actually wrote down the number Thirty-five.

In other words the person who interested Viki had won.

Luck had played bang into his hands. Steve had only to see who claimed the winnings on Thirty-five, to see who was communication so mysteriously with Viki. The bet, he noted, was one hundred pesos, and its winnings would be three thousand six hundred.

But luck is proverbially fickle, as Steve ought to have known by this time. He held

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his breath for as long as he could, then let it slowly and reluctantly out again.

For no one claimed the winnings! Viki's correspondent was clearly willing to lose three thousand six hundred pesos to remain unknown.

Then Steve caught his breath again. Greed had triumphed. To the croupier's repeated demand a small voice had finally owned up.

"I'm so sorry. I forgot. It's mine."

And with mingled emotions Steve saw the croupier push a pile of money toward the fortunate winner. It was Judy.

Steve sighed. A very pretty idea had gone wonky. He regarded Viki's back wistfully. It would have been fun to discover that she was receiving secret code messages over the roulette board from some sinister unknown.

He fought his way half-heartedly back to Judy.

"Come on," he said, "let's have a drink."

"I read in Aunt Gertrude's column of the Women's Police Gazette," remarked Judy some moments later as they sat together at the bar, "that the only real basis for married happiness is mutual confidence. In other words, spill it."

Steve clinked his glass against hers, quaffed, and sighed.

"D'you know, Judy, I'm thinking of giving up the Secret Service and joining the fire brigade," he said. "I've just made the brilliant discovery that our Viki—"

"Your Viki," she corrected him sweetly.

"My Viki"—he nodded—"is receiving mysterious messages over the roulette table. Guess who she's receiving them from."

"Hitler," Judy suggested.

"You." Steve shook his head sadly. "That little win of yours on Thirty-five—"

Judy interrupted him again. "My conscience is troubling me a little about that," she admitted. "You see, that wasn't my money but since no one seemed to want it—"

Steve was on his feet before she finished the sentence. He kissed her with unexpected warmth on the ear, and left her to pay for the drinks. The abruptness of his departure and the astonishing fact that he had left half his drink gave Judy the idea that something was afoot.

She caught up with him on the outskirts of the scrum around the roulette table. But the lady had vanished. Viki and her camp followers had melted away like snow.

"Good," Judy said hopefully. "Now we can go home to our hot water bottles."

Steve shook his head. The slow grin of battle spread over his wide mouth.

"Didn't you know," he said, grabbing Judy's arm, "Viki Lamarr is appearing in the cabaret at the Taborine at one o'clock tonight. I wouldn't miss it for worlds."

Judy suppressed a yawn. "This is a lovely honeymoon," she said.

CHAPTER II

SUICIDE ON CONSIGNMENT

THE Taborine at Monte Carlo was one of those night clubs where millionaires came for an hour or two to find solace and oblivion in the sweet strains of Pete (Swing-it) Jones' Red Hot Rhythm Hounds.

Three times a week the Taborine Cabaret advertised the appearance of Viki Lamarr ("She teases even without stripping") in a song and dance act. On these occasions the show was broadcast. In fact Viki Lamarr's broadcast was one of the brighter spots on the San Utopia radio program.

It was brighter even than the management realized. And radio listeners even as far away as Berlin tuned in on it eagerly.

In particular five men in a room in the Wilhelmstrasse near the German Foreign Office did not miss a moment of the Taborine Cabaret. Viki would have been flattered had she seen who composed that distant audience. For among their number were no less personages than Herr Heinrich Himmler, chief of the Gestapo, and General (Field-Marshal) Goering himself.

And yet the songs Viki sang were not remarkable. *Parlez-moi d'Amour* could have had but little appeal to the puritan tastes of Herr Himmler and his gang.

The words of Viki's songs were, of course, strictly scanned by the military censor be-

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fore she was allowed to sing them. She stuck chiefly to old, well-tried favorites.

It was when she began her celebrated tap dance that the young S.S. man beside Herr Himmler became suddenly taut with attention.

"Elf," he rasped softly, *"sechs und zwanzig, fünf und dreizig . . ."*

He made a note of the numbers on a slip of paper. Eleven, twenty-six and thirty-five. These were the same numbers which had so fascinated Steve Brabazon in the Casino an hour or two previously.

For a few minutes the S.S.man continued to jot down numbers. Then he passed the slip across the table to one of his companions. This second man glanced at the numbers, thumbed the pages of a small booklet in typescript, and scribbled on a second slip of paper. This he placed respectfully into the hands of Herr Himmler

On it was written: "This morning's test flight at Calle del Cielo believed entirely successful. Friday three a.m. fixed for Plan G. Signed: Schmidt."

Herr Himmler's weak eyes crinkled behind his thick-lensed pince-nez into an expression which might almost have been a smile. He rose to his feet, every other inch the conquering hero.

"On Saturday morning, gentlemen," he said, "our rather unenthusiastic friends in Gran Frijole will be fighting in spite of themselves against Valparadiso, enemy of the German Reich."

The other four men had risen with him. "Heil Hitler!" they sang out in a well trained bit of chorus work. To which Herr Himmler barked back: "Heil Hitler!" Or was it, "Heil Himmler"? He spoke so abruptly that it was hard to tell.

MEANWHILE in faroff San Utopia Steve and Judy were enjoying the night life at the Taborine on champagne at three hundred pesos a bottle. As Judy had remarked, she might not have another honeymoon for a long time.

They had enjoyed Viki's turn. Steve particularly—especially the moment when she appeared in a top hat, a bit of gauze, and a sweet girlish smile.

"Poor little thing," he confided to Judy in a whisper, "she told me the wicked Gestapo agents had even pinched all her clothes."

"Heil Hitler!" Judy murmured unkindly.

Then came the celebrated tap dance. Steve, who loathed tap dancing, refilled his champagne glass.

It was a tricky dance, syncopated, irregular, teasing. While the Red Hot Rhythm Hounds burned it up Steve found himself beating the same tattoo with his fingers against the tablecloth.

Suddenly Steve's heart was thumping almost as rapidly as Viki's steel-shot feet were tapping the floor.

There was a haunting familiarity about those taps. Steve's mind clicked. *Tap. Tap-tap-tap-tap.* Long. *Short-short-short-short.* Dot. *Dash-dash-dash-dash!*

Steve's memory of the Morse telegraph code was rusty. But he seemed to recall that a dot followed by four dashes was the number one. Repeated, it was the number eleven. And eleven was the number Viki had written down first in the Casino tonight.

Steve may have breathed during those next few seconds. If so, he was unconscious of the fact. With lightning rapidity the rhythm of Viki's dance altered.

Tap-tap. Then heavier, *tap-tap-tap.* A light tap, followed by four heavier ones again. Two dots, three dashes. One dot, four dashes. And that added up exactly to twenty-six. And twenty-six was the second number Viki's unknown correspondent had bet on.

Three dots, two dashes followed by five dots. Thirty-five, the number on which Judy had illegally won three thousand six hundred pesos. Steve nearly cheered out loud.

The dance continued and Steve made a mental note of half a dozen further members. Lovely, fascinating numbers. Unfortunately at the moment they didn't mean anything.

The lights went up in a roar of applause.

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Viki took a bow, covering herself in her modest way with a fan, and withdrew.

"That girl," said Steve, calling a waiter, "has a great future—and it's going to start tonight."

"Can I come along too?" Judy asked.

Steve shook his head. "This is one of those things," he said gravely, "that a man has to face alone."

VIKI LAMARR had a visitor waiting for her in her dressing room. He emerged from a mass of orchids as she entered and she recognized the scent of his brilliantine.

"Oh, it's you again," she said wearily.

Test Pilot Carlos del Toro admitted the fact sadly. He presented his orchids hopefully and was briefly told to put them on the table. Carlos, who was twenty and had read a hundred paper-backed novels dealing with the finer points of Love, though he knew all there was to know on the subject.

He screwed his really very pleasant features into an expression of painful passion, gulped slightly and took the plunge.

"You are beautiful tonight, Viki," he muttered.

They always started that way in books, after which the fair charmer generally said: "Am I?" in a sort of husky, come-hither voice. The reply to that question was the mad, passionate embrace, from which point onward conversation became unnecessary.

But Viki spoiled the whole scene by seeming not to hear him. She merely sat down in front of her dressing table and started to smear cold cream all over her face.

He said it again.

"Yes, yes." Viki nodded impatiently without even looking round. "I know."

Carlos was stumped. Looked at sensibly it had been a rather silly thing to tell her, since in Carlos' opinion she was quite obviously the most beautiful creature since Helen of Troy.

He started again. "I love you madly!"

But she seemed to know that too, and not to care much. During the first weeks of their acquaintance she had, perhaps, allowed her zeal for her job to carry her a little too far. She had combined business with pleasure in a way which was having these appalling after-effects.

For she was bored. Bored to tears with Carlos del Toro. He shadowed her, he haunted her. She could hardly walk across a room without tripping over him.

Within the first two days of their—shall we say—friendship, she had learned all he could tell her about the experimental seaplane base at Calle del Cielo. All, that is, that she dared to learn.

There were, of course, other things that he could find out for her. The plan, for instance, of the wireless hook-up in the underground control room. But even Carlos would not be dope enough to remain unsuspecting if she mentioned that.

BUT she had allowed him to dangle—just in case. Who knew? He might become really desperate and do what she wanted. She regarded him with a slow gaze from half-shut tawny eyes.

"But you don't love me enough," she breathed in that throaty whisper which made Carlos feel as if the starch were melting in his collar.

"I love you enough for anything. Anything!" he repeated extravagantly.

She turned away, smiling her sad and very effective smile. She shook her head with a little heart-rending sigh.

Carlos swallowed it, hook, line and sinker. "If you won't believe me I'll shoot myself to prove it." He had read the line somewhere; though he couldn't remember whether the lady's heart had softened or whether the chap had actually had to shoot himself.

In the mirror on her dressing table Viki saw him recklessly pull forth his service automatic, waving it around wildly. He had publicly threatened suicide once or twice before, but this time there was a drawn desperation about him which suggested that he might really do it. A queer thrill tingled down her backbone. She could make use of a Calle del Cielo test pilot in this frame of mind.

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Carlos continued to wave his gun around, working himself up into an almost suicidal frenzy. Actually the gun was unloaded and Carlos had not the slightest intention of doing such a fool thing. But he was a Latin and given to these extravagant gestures.

Suddenly Viki was in his arms, giving a very good imitation of a heart-broken sob.

"Don't!" she murmured tensely. "Take me. But don't take your life."

It was a proposal which suited Carlos down to the ground. He kissed the cold cream off her face eagerly. She disentangled herself.

"But first, my darling," she whispered, toying with his necktie, "there's something you can do for me."

"Anything!" said Carlos largely.

Shyly, haltingly, like a small girl planning a raid on a sweet shop, she touched upon her scheme of getting hold of the underground layout of the Calle del Cielo control room.

Carlos heard her at first with bewilderment, then with frank disbelief; and finally, as he realized the meaning of her words, with frozen horror. For the first time he saw clearly why she had always been so interested in his work.

And for the first time in weeks Carlos del Toro remembered Lolita, the very pleasant and jolly girl of about his own age who lived in his own native suburb. Lolita was not glamourous; but to Carlos suddenly Lolita seemed to be about the only girl in the world.

He became aware of Viki's intimate nearness with something of a sobering shock. He drew away from her a little stiffly.

"You will kindly excuse me, Señorita Lamarr," he said in a flat, toneless voice which didn't sound like his own. "I must report myself at once to my superior officer."

He bowed stiffly and turned. Then he stopped dead in his tracks.

For a third person had stepped quietly into the room and closed the door behind him. He was a small man, of indefinite age and nationality, though his passport, issued by Brazil, described him as forty and said that he was an exporter of Swiss cheese.

His name was as unremarkable as his appearance. It was Schmidt.

Carlos may have seen him before. It was not a face which most people would have remembered. Herr Schmidt was always traveling between the Valparadisan Riviera and his home in Brazil. Actually he had been among the number who crowded round the roulette table in the Casino earlier tonight.

He removed his bowler hat politely. "You were saying, Señor del Toro?" he inquired.

Carlos paused awkwardly, suddenly aware of Viki's scanty costume. "I was just going." He flushed with embarrassment.

Herr Schmidt shook his head quietly.

"I'm afraid not, *señor,*" he said very gently. "On the contrary you are going to commit suicide, just as you threatened to do a moment ago."

Carlos' reply was never spoken. Even before Herr Schmidt had completed his sentence there was a muffled plop from the silenced automatic in his hand and simultaneously a small dark circle appeared just above Carlos' temple.

Carlos seemed to stand quite still for a brief moment. Then his knees gave way beneath him and he subsided with a dull thud on to the dressing room carpet.

The son of Alfredo del Toro, the famous war ace, had no opportunity of repeating his father's gallant exploits. Lolita's next letter was returned to her unopened.

CHAPTER III

LET'S GO TO YOUR HOUSE

STEVE BRABAZON, having forcibly taken Judy back to the hotel and explained to her that tonight's activities were only in the nature of a reconnaissance flight, walked cheerfully along the stone corridor which led to the Taborine dressing rooms.

It was a long time since he had called on an actress in her dressing room, and with Judy safely tucked in bed he was looking forward to it.

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He rapped heartily on the door and, receiving no answer, barged in. Viki, looking scared out of her wits, stared at him aghast. Steve halted, and the slow impudent grin on his wide mouth froze there.

His eyes were narrow slits of blue ice as his glance dropped to the carpet. He recognized del Toro's uniform, saw the tell-tale service automatic grasped in his right hand.

"He's dead," Viki whispered.

"So I see." Steve's glance swept the dressing room. There seemed to be no one else in the room. He ran a large hand through the sandy mop of his hair, shaking himself mentally, trying to come to grips with the grim twist tonight's promised comedy had taken.

"He committed suicide," Viki explained in a strangled whisper, "because of me."

"Obviously," Steve nodded.

He strolled toward the body, tapping an unlighted cigarette on his thumb nail. It was not the first corpse he had seen, but that didn't make the experience any less unpleasant.

In days past Steve also had read those paper-backed romances amongst which Carlos had browsed, in which young men shot themselves for love.

But there was this difference between the two men. Steve didn't believe them.

He lay down and fingered Carlos' automatic for a second, replaced it, and straightened. There was a touch of the old mockery in his eyes as he turned around to Viki.

He clicked his teeth in mild reproof. "You can't have suicides draped around your dressing room," he reproached her; "it gives a girl a bad reputation. Shall we call in the police, or shall we go out and have a spot of supper somewhere and discuss the matter quietly?"

Her answer surprised him.

"Please call the police," she said coolly.

"Okay, lady." He shrugged. "I was only trying to be helpful."

He paused at the door. "If you're still at large after the police arrive the supper date still stands."

But Steve was not optimistic about it. For he had observed that the "suicide's" automatic had not even been loaded.

STEVE thrust his hands in his pockets and supported his long, lanky frame comfortably against the wall of the corridor outside Viki's dressing room; while Law and Order, in the shape of a very small San Utopia inspector of police and an unwieldly youthful constable, interviewed Viki.

He wondered how long it would take them to discover the automatic. They could not overlook such tell-tale evidence for long. Even in San Utopia suicides rarely shot themselves with unloaded guns.

Five minutes passed. Steve shifted his weight and smoked a cigarette, blowing thoughtful smoke rings. He waited patiently for the moment when Viki would reappear with a policeman on each side of her.

He sighed. It was a pity that the case of Viki Lamarr should be taken out of his hands just as things were beginning to look up. Had she shot young del Toro herself or had the murder been done by an accomplice?

That was the interesting point. For if Viki Lamarr, as Steve suspected, was only one of a spy ring operating in San Utopia Steve badly wanted to find out who her pals were.

And more important: what they were up to. What the meaning was of that message she had so cunningly managed to broadcast during tonight's cabaret show.

Steve scowled and blew a savage ring of smoke toward the ceiling. Locked up by the police, Viki would be useless to him. The moment her arrest became known her accomplices (if any) would vanish like flies in winter.

The reason for poor del Toro's murder was not hard to guess. Clearly Viki had tried to worm out of him the secrets of the Calle del Cielo experimental airdrome. They were secrets so closely guarded that even Steve had no idea of their nature.

Then—the tragedy was easy to reconstruct—Carlos must have suddenly fallen for the fact that his lady love was a Ger-

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man spy. Like a fool he must have betrayed his knowledge of that fact.

The sequel was only too inevitable. In one word: death.

Steve Brabazon whistled a bar or two of *If You've Never been the Lover of the Landlady's Daughter,* a little ruefully. For it occurred to him that he, also, shared the fateful secret of Viki Lamarr's real profession.

And it wouldn't take the other side long to find it out. Steve's muscles tensed in joyful anticipation.

It was at this moment that a tall, distinguished gentleman in a beautifully cut tail coat came out of Viki's dressing room and approached Steve. Steve recognized that scion of the aristocratic Ortini family, Don Aldo Francesco.

THE Don tapped a straw-tipped cigarette on the edge of his gold cigarette case, adjusted his monocle and peered at Steve as if it hurt his dignity to address such insignificant strangers. Nevertheless he bowed slightly, with old-world courtesy.

"Listen, brother," he said airily. "Evacuate yourself. Buzz off. Scram."

Steve listened to him politely. Then, very deliberately, he reached out his left hand, seized the neat ready-made white bow tie which was attached to the Don's collar by elastic, stretched out the elastic, and let it snap painfully back into position again.

The Don's mouth gaped with the indignity of the insult. His monocle came adrift.

"Say!" he protested hotly, "you can't do that!"

Steve did it again.

"Do that again, and I'll—"

Steve obliged as requested. But whatever the Don had planned to do he gave the matter further consideration and decided against it. Which was probably wise. Steve, in spite of the goodhumored smile which played about the corners of his wide mouth, was just in the mood to sock somebody on the jaw—the Don by preference.

"You were about to say?" Steve prompted him gently.

The Don gulped. "You got me all wrong, pal," he hastened to explain. "I only meant to say there's no use wasting your time hanging around for Miss Viki Lamarr. She sent me to say she can't keep her date with you tonight."

"Isn't that just too bad?" Steve drawled, but made no move to leave.

"Poor little kid!" The Don dropped his voice sympathetically. "I guess she's haywire on account that guy committed suicide. It's pretty tough on her."

It's fairly tough on del Toro, too," Steve pointed out dryly. His blue eyes narrowed into probing slits of steely penetration. But his tone of voice remained conversational. "By the way, Don Aldo," he inquired casually, "was it *you* that bumped off Carlos del Toro?"

The Don, who had finally readjusted his monocle to his satisfaction, dropped it again in stupefied astonishment. His gesture of amazement seemed so spontaneous that Steve was inclined to think it genuine.

"Say!" The Ortini's voice had dropped to an uncertain whisper. "You don't suppose the guy was bumped off, do you?" His thin face had gone a shade or two paler and he [illegible]nced up and down the narrow corridor nervously.

"Be your age!" Steve advised him briefly. "Do you think the people you're working for are running a Sunday-school picnic?"

Don Aldo found himself sweating slightly behind the collar. Steve's words had started an unpleasant train of thought in his mind. So far his job in San Utopia *had* been something of a picnic. Swell clothes. Plenty of dough. Nice company.

He had taken his orders from Viki. Nice, easy jobs, mostly: attending the Casino, eating in slap-up restaurants, and doing a bit of high-class snooping. It was the kind of work which appealed to the taste and talents of the last of the Ortinis.

But if guns were going to start popping and people were going to get bumped off, Don Aldo Francesco del Ortini was going to take a steamship ticket for the nearest

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neutral port. He believed in crime. But not in danger.

Meanwhile, however, he had a job to do. Which was to dissuade Steve Brabazon from waiting for Viki. He sighed, and tried a new technique, gently persuasive.

"LISTEN, pal," he began confidentially. "I'm your friend, see? You don't want to hang around that Lamaar dame. She's poisonous. She's lethal. She's the new secret weapon they're all talking about."

Steve politely stifled a yawn. "You fascinate me," he drawled.

Steve could be peculiarly irritating when he wanted to. He wasn't doing badly now; for the Don flushed a mottled purple beneath his grayish complexion.

But being a diplomat (especially with men bigger than himself) he controlled his temper. He tried the frank, honest, man-to-man stuff.

"Think of your sweet little wife." He appealed to Steve's better nature. "Waiting at home for you, patiently, with trust in her heart."

"Obviously," Steve pointed out with a grin, "you don't know my wife."

The Don ignored this cynical interruption. "For her sake," he pleaded eloquently, "leave the Lamarr dame alone. She's bound to lead you astray. Think of that poor guy del Toro."

The grin remained on Steve's face, but it was no longer humorous. "That's exactly whom I was thinking of," he said quietly.

Unfortunately the corridor was dimly lighted and the Don did not observe the cold fire in Steve's eyes. Like many a better man before him he thought Steve's lazy good-natured manner indicated an easy-going pliant nature.

It was a mistake. And so was his next remark.

"Get this straight, buddy"—he gave way to his mounting exasperation—"I've been advising you to lay off Viki for your own good. Now I'm not asking you. I'm telling you."

The Don's next gesture was the biggest mistake of all. Looking as much like a film gangster as he knew how, he made a furtive movement toward the gun holster he carried under his left armpit.

Steve, still leaning nonchalantly against the corridor wall, watched him with a flicker of amusement. He had been wondering just how long it would take to irritate the Don to the point of threatening physical violence.

Now that the moment had arrived Steve felt more cheerful than he had for hours. He had just been wanting some such excuse as this for working off his pent-up emotions.

Steve's movements were deceptively smooth. He appeared to ease his lanky body from the wall with studied deliberation. Actually he moved just a little more slowly than greased lightning.

The Ortini's thin, artistic fingers were still hovering an inch or two from his left armpit when Steve hit him. Steve hit him just below the right eye. Steve hit him only once. It was quite sufficient.

The Don described a sort of half corkscrew dive and subsided quietly on the tiled floor. Either he had passed out temporarily, or else he had lost all taste for continuing the argument; for he continued to lie sensibly where he had fallen.

Steve, in search of more entertaining company, strolled up the corridor and re-entered Viki's dressing room.

IF HE expected to find Viki under arrest and in handcuffs he was disappointed. He had counted without the gallantry of Inspector Fernandez of the San Utopia police.

It was not often that Inspector Fernandez had an opportunity of dealing in a professional way with such a lovely lady at such close quarters, and he was making the most of it.

At the moment of Steve's entrance he was administering first aid to Viki who had apparently fainted. Poor, sensitive creature—the tragedy had been too much for her gentle nature!

He glared fiercely at Steve, and continued to chafe Viki's wrists with what

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Señora Fernandez, if she had been present, would certainly have considered excess zeal.

"Don't mind me," Steve said pleasantly. "Go right ahead."

Viki chose that moment to revive. From the corner of her eye she gave Steve a nasty look, then turned to the inspector with her most meltingly pathetic smile.

"Thank you, Inspector Fernandez," she murmured in a husky whisper which made the tiny fellow's huge mustache bristle with manly pride. "What would I have done without you?"

"What you've done *with* him is more to the point," Steve murmured dryly.

The body of del Toro, he noted, had already been removed. The automatic which had been found grasped in the dead man's hand was carefully laid on a piece of paper on the dressing table.

Steve edged casually toward it. He leaned over, glanced at it with a slightly puzzled frown, and sniffed it cautiously.

Then he straightened, whistling. The reason why Viki had not already been arrested on suspicion of murder had become suddenly clear. For this gun was not only loaded but one shot had been fired from it. During the brief interval between the time when Steve had left the dressing room and the police had entered it, the guns had been changed.

Steve glanced at Viki appreciatively. "Neat work." He wasn't sure, but he fancied that Viki's tawny eyes flickered back a glimmer of amused satisfaction.

Inspector Fernandez confined the remainder of the interview to routine questions, apologizing to Viki for the inconvenience to herself which was unavoidable. She would, of course, have to attend an inquest; though this, he assured her, was a mere formality.

Actually the inspector's tact and willingness to hurry over the unpleasant details of Carlos del Toro's death were due not only to the lady's remarkable beauty. It was the policy of the San Utopia police to hush up scandals of this sort. As a rich man's playground, San Utopia guards its good reputation as its very life blood. Deaths and tragedies are bad publicity.

"Suicide, of course." The inspector twirled his terrific mustaches, bowed magnificently and with a gallant little speech of apology, withdrew from the dressing room. The constable, who all this time had stood tongue-tied in a far corner of the room, gaped once more at Viki, blushed violently, and bolted after his chief.

VIKI drew a faint breath of relief and fumbled for a cigarette. Steve lighted it for her. On the whole he too was relieved. Richly as she deserved to be jailed, Viki at large was much more useful to him than Viki locked up.

"Put some clothes on," he suggested bluntly. "I'll turn my back."

"But Steve darling," she pleaded prettily, "after the dreadful thing that's happened I can't possible come out with you tonight! Didn't you get my message?"

Steve grinned. "I did," he admitted with a shrug. "At the moment the messenger is lying peacefully on the floor out there in the corridor. With careful nursing I expect he'll come around eventually."

"You hit him?" Viki looked at Steve with new interest.

Steve's lips twisted with faint mockery. "I had to," he explained gravely. "He was trying to keep us apart."

Viki laughed, and with haste and complete lack of self-consciousness wriggled into a frock of pale ivory satin which fitted her like a sheath.

"That was very naughty of you," she reproved him lightly, "and it won't do any good. I'm going home."

"Wherever you like," Steve agreed pleasantly. "I'm coming with you."

Viki glanced at him swiftly, a sudden hint of suspicion in her eyes. At first his persistence had been flattering and rather amusing. But if continued it might prove awkward.

Much as she would have enjoyed going out with him in the ordinary way, she had other, more important things to do tonight. Instructions from Herr Schmidt to

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carry out. By dawn this morning the celebrated Viki Lamarr must have disappeared from San Utopia without trace.

Everything, the fate of Plan G itself, depended on her successful disappearance.

She began to regard Steve Brabazon with distinct annoyance. She powdered her nose with a vicious jab.

"And if I refuse to let you come with me?"

Steve sprawled himself out more comfortably on the sofa. "You won't. In these moods I'm irresistible."

Viki's cheeks colored. "And if I call my friend Inspector Fernandez and tell him you're annoying me?"

"In that case"—Steve paused to blow one smoke ring through another—"in that case, I'm afraid I should have to tell him about those guns being changed."

Her face went white again. "He'd never believe you," she said.

"Possibly not," Steve agreed. "But at least he'd have to ask a lot of awkward questions. Some of them might be difficult to answer."

He saw out of the corner of his eye that she was afraid to call his bluff. If the death of Test Pilot Carlos del Toro should be subjected to full investigation Viki's goose would be well and properly cooked.

"You're trying to blackmail me!"

"That's right." Steve nodded cheerfully. "Shall we go?"

He stretched his long legs, rose and tucked her arm affectionately through his. She came with him down the dimly lit corridor and out into the street in ominous silence.

CHAPTER IV

ABDUL THE BULBO

IT WAS not a very joyful party. It began badly. As Steve and Viki emerged into the narrow street, a powerful sports car was just whizzing past the stage entrance of the Taborine. The driver might have been either drunk or practicing for a sweepstakes.

Viki saw this approaching torrent of destruction a fraction of a second before Steve. Being a resourceful young lady, she promptly gave Steve a gentle but firm push into the narrow street.

The pavement was only a foot or two wide and Steve lost his balance on the edge of the curb. He made a frantic dive across the street and scrambled to safety on the opposite pavement. The rear wing of the car actually caught his flying coattails.

He picked himself up and hastily rejoined Viki who was disappearing down the street as fast as she could.

"You ought to be more careful with your boy friends," he advised her lightly. "Two corpses on your hands during one evening would be sure to cause gossip."

Not the most cheerful way to begin a night's outing. It was very pleasant, of course, to have such an exquisite creature as Viki Lamarr hanging affectionately on your arm. But when the exquisite creature in question was bent on the sole object of killing you as quickly as possible, there were drawbacks to the arrangement.

Steve consoled himself with the thought that the night at any rate ought not to be dull. He steered her into Pascal's, a fashionable bar frequented by people who feel there's something immoral about going to bed before daybreak. He seated her in a corner and ordered champagne.

"Just one drink," she said hopefully. "Then I really must go home."

Steve touched his glass to hers. "Until tomorrow morning I'm free to do whatever you like," he said pleasantly. "Within reason," he added cautiously.

Her tawny eyes were narrow slits of suspicion and hostility. For a moment she watched him like a cat.

"What exactly do you want?" she asked slowly.

Steve's blue eyes wore their most mocking and maddeningly irritating twinkle. "What do you think?" he said.

"Ach! Du bist . . ." The words were German and muttered beneath her breath. But Steve guessed accurately that they were not flattering.

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He sipped his champagne and rejoiced inwardly. Already her mask of poised sophistication had slipped once or twice. Though she tried to hide it, she was rattled. And that was what Steve was working for.

He excused himself and went to the bar counter to buy a pack of cigarettes. While he counted out his change he watched the corner table in the mirror behind the bar.

What he saw was illuminating, though not unexpected. For while his back was turned Viki neatly tipped the contents of a little phial she carried in her handbag into his unfinished glass of champagne.

Under his breath Steve hummed a scrap or two of *She Was Poor but She Was Honest.* He was not unduly conceited. But he did not think the average girl would first try to shove him under a passing motor car and then poison his drinks just because she was bored with his company.

It was safe to assume, therefore, that Viki had a definite and pressing reason for wishing to ditch him. Steve's determination to stick around increased. In course of time she might do something silly. Try to get in touch with some of her own people, for instance.

For she must have accomplices. There was Don Aldo, of course. But he was obviously small fry. Steve was interested in bigger fish.

And before the night was over—always, he reflected wryly, assuming that he lived that long—Viki might make the mistake of leading him to her superiors.

He returned in an optimistic mood to the table, carefully poured away the rest of his champagne into the flower vase, and refilled his glass.

"What is it you don't like about me?" he inquired in an injured tone. "Is it my necktie? The way I brush my hair?"

IT WAS well after two when they left Pascal's. By half past three they had visited most of the better known late spots in San Utopia. Steve, who knew every inch of the place, seemed as fresh as ever and apparently all on for keeping it up until daybreak.

Viki pretended to stifle a yawn. But her slim hand with the long tapered fingernails of jungle red shook slightly, betraying the ragged state of her nerves. A hopeless look of desperation had begun to haunt her eyes.

She had tried every trick she knew to get rid of him. She had made subtle veiled threats. She had made delightful and less subtle promises. She had pleaded fatigue, a headache, a previous engagement. At one night club she had departed stealthily by way of the back door, only to find Steve waiting for her with a taxi and the address of another night club he had just remembered.

She began to think it would take a major operation to get rid of him. He was like a Siamese Twin.

She glanced at her platinum-and-diamond wrist watch. Half past three! Her heart skipped a beat. Within an hour and a half Herr Schmidt would expect her to have left San Utopia. And Herr Schmidt was not accustomed to having his orders disobeyed.

Her blood ran slightly cold at the thought. Even this far from Germany, Herr Schmidt had his little ways and means of seeing that people who disobeyed orders did so only once.

She turned to Steve, her lovely face pale under her makeup. She spoke jerkily.

"Have it your own way!" Steve recognized the note of panic in her whisper. "Come home with me if that's what you want. Only we must hurry."

Steve smiled lazily and extended his cigarette case to her.

"But I'm just beginning to enjoy myself," he drawled. Then, very casually, he added: "If you're bored here, perhaps you can suggest a night club."

He heard her catch her breath. When she spoke her manner was off-hand, much too off-hand to be convincing.

"I know a little café down by the water front that is sometimes amusing late at night," she said.

"What's it called?"

Viki glanced round before she replied.

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Then lowering her voice instinctively, she said: "The Café Conquistador."

The Conquistador. Steve could not help recalling that a pro-Nazi society by that same name had existed in Valparadiso for some years past.

More curious, he had never before heard of this café. Which in itself made it practically unique. For Steve Brabazon was known by practically every bartender and café proprietor in San Utopia.

This move, in short, looked like the works. In desperation, Viki might very well be leading him straight into the rat's nest of her crowd. And this was the move he had been gambling on all evening.

He rose with an air of faint boredom, thrusting his large hands into his pockets as he grinned down at her. "Okay, lady," he said. "Let's go. I'm willing to try anything once."

Viki did not reply. But the ghost of a smile lingered round the corners of her seductive mouth as she slipped her arm through his. For it was unlikely, she reflected, highly unlikely, that he would ever visit the Café Conquistador more than once.

THE Café Conquistador was not a remarkable place, outwardly. Like a dozen other drinking joints in the neighborhood of the waterfront it catered to a cosmopolitan crowd of riffraff, and was of course known to the police.

In fact the Café Conquistador had a fairly good reputation with the police. Unlike the neighboring bars it was a quiet spot. Drunken brawls never broke out within its respectable precincts. No one had ever complained of noise or rowdy singing in the small hours of the morning.

This in itself ought to have been suspicious; but the San Utopia police are tolerant and don't look for trouble unnecessarily.

Tonight, for instance, Inspector Fernandez, had he bothered to pay the place a routine visit, would have found little to arouse his curiosity.

The usual handful of sailors and dock workers, playing mysterious card games with the usual grubby, dog-eared packs of cards. Three or four women of so-called doubtful reputation—which means of course that there is no doubt at all about their reputation.

Had he troubled to look further he would have seen a young man in air force uniform sitting at a table with a girl over two small glasses of a greenish milky-looking fluid, recognizable as that same pernicious drink absinthe, which is very sensibly forbidden by Valparadisan law.

Inspector Fernandez, who had great sympathy for anyone connected with such a tricky thing as an airplane, would have shrugged his tolerant shrug, stood the poor chap an absinthe himself, and gone on his way.

But absinthe only partly accounted for the strange glazed look in the pale eyes of Pedro Sandoz, the young man in air force uniform. Nor can the drink be blamed for the fact that his hand was about as steady as a humming bird as he lifted the small glass to his lips.

For many weeks Pedro Sandoz had been living in clover. In fact ever since the night he had come over from the experimental airdrome at Calle del Cielo to try his luck at the Casino.

Like many a young hopeful before him, he had been cleaned out, even to his bus fare back to Calle del Cielo. Then the miracle had happened. An inconspicuous little Brazilian Swiss-cheese traveling salesman named Schmidt had come generously to the rescue.

They had a drink together and a long, though vague talk. Pedro's memory of the rest of the evening remained dim. There was champagne, and half a dozen beautiful girls. A very comfortable limousine had taken him back to Calle del Cielo. Next morning he had wakened to find his wallet bulging with currency of the realm.

Since then life had been for Pedro Sandoz a rose-tinted dream. Money, girls, everything his mean heart craved for—with only vague talk about a future event known as Plan G, in which he, Pedro Sandoz,

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would have to take an unpleasantly dangerous part.

Tonight he had awakened from that dream with a nasty jolt. He had just learned that Plan G was to be put into operation on Friday at three A.M. In other words, in exactly twenty-four hours.

THIS information had had just the opposite effect upon Señor Bulbo, the diplomat from Gran Frijole, who sat at a table in the far end of the room with Herr Schmidt, the Swiss cheese exporter domiciled in Brazil.

Señor Bulbo was bursting with good humor and love for the human race. For from Señor Bulbo's point of view, Plan G meant that he was at last going to have an opportunity he had yearned for for years. Namely, the opportunity to murder a large number of innocent people in cold blood.

For the truth is that Señor Bulbo was not a kindly man. Life had gone sour on him from his tenth year, at which age little Bulbo junior had ceased to grow. Even his vast, Duce-like chin (or rather series of chins), coupled with his Italian ancestry, could not altogether compensate for the fact that our Señor Bulbo remained (among other things) a runt. He was known to his intimates as the bulbous Bulbo, or Abdul the Bulbo, and he resented it.

Perhaps it was his diminutive size that rankled and had engendered in Señor Bulbo an insatiable lust for power. At the age of fifteen he had gone into politics, organizing a gang of high-spirited youths of his own age who roamed the streets of his Gran Frijolian city at night breaking the windows of anyone silly enough not to vote for little Bulbo's father, who was then running for town councilor on a conservative ticket.

Since that time he had never looked back. At eighteen he was running a protection racket in his city which made the efforts of Al Capone in Chicago mild and humanitarian by contrast.

Later, stimulated by the endeavors of Mussolini's Fascists in Italy, Bulbo learned the Fascist salute, bought himself a black shirt, and with the help of his gang proceeded to beat up everybody who had taken a dislike to him.

But all this was years ago. It was obvious from the start that a lad so talented in the arts of persuasion would go far. Now, at the age of thirty-five, Señor Bulbo was a respectable and distinguished Gran Frijolian diplomat—striped trousers, silk hat, and all.

The fact that he still remained at heart a hooligan and a gangster with an unsatisfied craving for power and mass murder was unfortunate.

The chaos in Europe was his big opportunity and he intended to take it. From the beginning he had used all his influence to get Gran Frijole steamed up to the point of attacking Valparadiso. For to tell the truth, Valparadiso was obstinately inhospitable to Nazi agents; and a victory for Bulbo would be a victory for his pet hero Hitler. Hence Berlin's interest in the tap dancing of Viki Lamarr; hence the presence of Herr Schmidt.

But unfortunately for Bulbo, the Gran Frijolian citizenry, though fascinated by a fine flow of Nazi money, was opposed to fighting Valparadiso or any other state. The martial spirit was indeed at a low ebb. It began to look as if Señor Bulbo had backed the wrong horse.

At least that's the way it looked to people who were ignorant of Plan G. In twenty-four hours it would look quite different. Señor Bulbo stroked his many chins happily.

Shortly after three A.M. tomorrow, when Señor Bulbo had returned to Gran Frijole, he would receive a telegram from Herr Schmidt. And at that signal Señor Bulbo's Black Squadron of fast bombers would take off from their base fifty or sixty miles within the Gran Frijolian border.

A quarter of an hour later these deadly planes would appear over a completely surprised San Utopia, proceeding towards the great Valparadisan city of Porreales only a few miles further up the coast. By dawn

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Porreales and San Utopia would be in flames and a large proportion of the civil population wiped out.

Meanwhile the Gran Frijolian government would have absolutely no knowledge of this flagrant act of war. Not until it was too late would an astonished world awake to the fact that Gran Frijole and Valparadiso were at war.

And yet—and this was the diabolical cunning of Plan G—this murderous outrage would appear to the world to be fully justified. In Gran Frijole itself Señor Bulbo—instead of being tried for murder and shot—would appear as a national hero. Who knew? He might even supplant the current dictator in the public esteem.

In any case Valparadiso and Gran Frijole would be at war.

Such was Señor Bulbo's half of Plan G.

The other and more important half was less simple. But it had been carefully thought out in every detail by the most brilliant brain in the Gestapo.

Not by Herr Heindrich Himmler—but by the inconspicuous little Swiss cheese exporter (of Brazil) who sat quietly at Bulbo's table in the Café Conquistador.

CHAPTER V

FIRE WHEN READY

VIKI LAMARR'S rap on the closed oak door of the Café Conquistador was unexpectedly hesitant. There were two reasons.

In the first place, it was strictly against the rules to bring strangers to the place after the official closing time. In the second place, desperately as she wished to get rid of Steve, she would have preferred a method less drastic.

For she rather liked Steve. Something about his cheerful insolence appealed to her. In normal circumstances he was the kind of young man with whom she would willingly have gone places and done things.

She sighed wistfully to herself. But after all in this harsh world a girl has to look after her own interests first. She repeated the rap, more firmly.

Steve noted it for future reference: two slow taps followed by three rapid ones. He, too, was conscious of a certain very reasonable hesitancy. He had a shrewd suspicion that he was behaving like the proverbial lamb going innocently to the slaughter.

And yet, in the illogical manner of a born gambler, he felt nothing but tense and joyful anticipation.

Optimistically he reflected that Judy had a rough idea of what he was up to. Since she would undoubtedly be sending out search parties if he didn't eventually return to the hotel he told himself that nothing very fatal could occur. He tried not to remember the "suicide" of Carlos del Toro.

The café door opened a cautious inch or two. Viki murmured something quickly beneath her breath, and Steve followed her into the smoke-laden atmosphere of the little café. He heard the door close behind him and a heavy bolt thrust home.

His first impression of the place was disappointing. It was like a hundred other waterside joints he'd seen. On second glance, however, the Café Conquistador became more promising. For gaping at him in surprise, if not exactly delight, he recognized the artistocratic features of Don Aldo Francesco del Ortini. The Don's right eye was a lovely study in black and blue color effects.

Steve waved to him breezily and slipped his arm through Viki's. "I think I'm going to like this place," he said. "Such nice cheery people."

Steve's last remark was inaccurate. For at his entrance a sudden and ominous silence had fallen over the place. The card players stopped playing. The men lounging against the zinc bar put down their drinks and studied Steve with earnest hostility. Even the girls stared at him with suspicion.

For the crowd which gathered nightly in the Café Conquistador formed in its way one of the most exclusive clubs in San Utopia, and newcomers were resented.

Steve saw now that he had done them an injustice. They were not nearly so ordi-

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nary as he had at first thought. He had been in some tough joints before; but compared with tonight's little gathering the inmates had been, Steve admitted with reluctant admiration, a bunch of sissies.

For the men in the Café Conquistador were men with a grim purpose. Men whose lives hung on the slender thread of the desperate game they were playing. And each knew that one traitor in their midst meant the death of them all.

Steve realized in the frozen stillness his entrance had caused, in the cold menace of the dozen pairs of eyes which watched him, that Viki had led him into the lion's den with a vengeance.

HIS heart rejoiced at the same time that he cursed himself for a fool for not being armed. He returned the hostile gaze of the company with an insolent coolness and lack of concern he was far from feeling.

He reached mechanically for his cigarette case. A dozen hands traveled instinctively and swiftly toward a dozen weapons handily concealed in underarm holsters. Steve wisely ignored them and chose a cigarette. He lighted it with studied deliberation and was gratified to note that his hand was as steady as a rock.

He turned casually to the bar, elbowed a hulking great fellow dresed like a dock laborer to one side, and poured himself out a drink. He raised it critically to his lips, wondering when the explosion was going to take place.

But as yet no one had uttered a word. The continued silence was almost the most nerve-racking thing about the business.

Steve had played poker too often not to know that there were only two things to do when holding no cards at all. The more sensible was to throw in your hand. The other was to look innocently as if you had been dealt four aces.

"Go right ahead with the conversation, boys," he suggested amiably. "Don't mind me. I'm only a British Secret Service agent."

This outrageous remark met with a mixed reception. Pedro Sandoz, the aviator, went as pale as death. Señor Bulbo's vast chin shot out with characteristic pugnacity. Most of the others laughed with the forced brevity of people who laugh at a joke in doubtful taste.

Only Herr Schmidt, who seemed totally unaware of Steve's presence, continued in rapt attention to the mouthfuls of the poached egg he was eating. No one, actually, had believed Steve's simple statement of truth.

Don Aldo was the first to speak.

"Wise guy, huh?" he inquired.

"Brilliant," Steve reassured him.

"Some day, Steve darling," Viki put in with a delightful coquettish smile, "you're going to laugh yourself into an early grave."

"Yeah!" The Don agreed enthusiastically. "And I guess that day's just about come."

A thin stiletto had appeared in the Don's right hand and he weighed the weapon thoughtfully, trying its razor-like edge on his thumbnail.

He was an expert in the use of the Italian stiletto, especially in the dark and when his opponent's back was turned; or if—as to-night—he had plenty of assistance. Otherwise Don Aldo was primarily a man of peace.

Steve glanced from the glimmering knife to the grim row of faces which hedged him in. From neither did he derive much comfort. Only the weak face of the traitorous airman showed a trace of normal human horror. Steve caught his eye.

"We seem to be running around with the wrong sort of people," he remarked conversationally.

Pedro Sandoz buried his head in his arms, sprawling forward on to the table with a drunken sob.

"*Dios!* You're not going to murder him in cold blood?" he groaned. It was a question which was occurring somewhat uncomfortably to Steve himself.

Viki's voice had never sounded sweeter: "Of course not, you drunken fool!" she retorted.

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But Pedro's self-control had snapped. "I'll not go through with it!" he jerked out hysterically. "Plan G can go to hell! All of you can go to hell! As for tomorrow night—"

HE GOT no further. Someone tactfully dropped something heavy on the back of his head. He subsided gently across the absinthe-stained tablecloth, sleeping dreamlessly.

"And what is Plan G?" Steve inquired. "Or am I old enough to know?"

"Something tells me you're never going to be old enough to know," Don Aldo replied significantly. He regarded Steve with a frown of suspicion. "Listen, guy," he said, "what's that crack about you being a British spy?"

"Z-99's the name." Steve nodded pleasantly. "Generally I wear a large false beard."

Don Aldo appealed to the company. "Is this guy kidding me?" he bleated.

The slightly strained laughter which greeted the Don's plaintive question was reassuring. Steve realized that the more wildly indiscreet his remarks became the less they were likely to be believed. You could always, he found, fool people by telling them the truth.

Already the tension had lessened. Steve swung himself jauntily up on the bar and dangled his long legs over the edge. His mild blue eyes were smiling with engaging frankness. There was a purposely fatuous grin on his wide mouth.

Actually from this vantage spot he had made a rapid but thorough inspection of the café, noting the iron-barred windows, the bolted front door, the heavy iron chandelier which hung from the ceiling.

High up on the wall opposite the bar there was an unbarred window, covered with heavy brown paper. Steve eyed it wistfully; but it was much too high to reach.

"Just to while away the time," Steve suggested, "shall I tell you the story of how I once foiled the wicked Gestapo?"

The voice which answered this suggestion came from the far end of the room, and it sent a chill down Steve's spine. It was a quiet, toneless voice, as completely lacking in character as the speaker's appearance. And yet it commanded the instant attention of everybody in the room.

Herr Schmidt had this quality. He spoke little, but when he did wise people listened.

He had finished his poached egg and wiped the corners of his mouth. He brushed his bowler hat carefully on his cuff.

"About your encounter with the Gestapo, Mr. Brabazon," he prompted gently. "Would that be the time last autumn in Ostend?"

A harmless-sounding question. But it made Steve's heart jump into his throat. It meant, in fact, that the little game was over. There had, indeed, been a little affair in Ostend, involving Steve; and Herr Schmidt had recognized him for what he really was—a British agent.

AN ELECTRIC thrill had run around the room at Herr Schmidt's words. Once more there was murder in the eyes which ringed Steve round. And this time the murder was no longer softened with uncertainty.

Don Aldo tried to get it straight. "Is this guy a spy, or ain't he?" he demanded.

"One of the most enterprising, and"—Herr Schmidt hesitated apologetically—"if I may say so—foolish, in the British service."

Steve concede the point—at least about being foolish.

"You, Viki," Herr Schmidt continued, "were almost equally foolish to bring him here tonight. His presence raises an awkward problem. The solution is not murder. Murder is unpopular with the police.

"But if he were to be injured—I mean fatally, of course—in a drunken café brawl—"

He paused again with a faint smile of apology to Steve—"that would be a pity, but unavoidable."

Steve could almost hear the mob catch breath in anticipation. It was indeed distressing how quickly they caught on to

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the idea. A holy brawl with Steve as the burnt offering appealed to their peculiar sense of fun.

Little Señor Bulbo's beady black eyes danced with pleasure. He had played the respectable diplomat so long that he had almost forgotten the sheer joy of watching someone being beaten up.

Herr Schmidt, however, took little pleasure in scenes of active violence. He killed only when strategically necessary, and then with no more emotion than he would have felt in licking a postage stamp.

He placed his bowler hat carefully on his head: "If you gentlemen would not mind restraining your enthusiasm until I leave . . ."

He nodded curtly to Viki to follow him. Viki glanced at Steve, her spoiled-child lips puckered with disappointment. The disappointment, he felt, was caused more by the thought of missing the fun than by thought of his almost inevitable fate.

He blew her a kiss and promised to look her up some time.

And you, Señor Bulbo?" Herr Schmidt paused in the door. "Are you coming?"

But Abdul the Bulbo had already taken a ringside seat. "My dear Herr Schmidt, I wouldn't miss this for worlds," he said, massaging his multiple chins with delight. It promised to be just the sort of fight he really enjoyed—fifteen men against one, with no umpire.

Actually, some few minutes later, Señor Bulbo regretted this decision to remain. For shortly after the departure of Viki and Herr Schmidt the Café Conquistador became a distinctly unhealthy spot to stay in. In fact, within ten minutes the Café Conquistador looked as if Señor Bulbo's Black Squadron had singled it out as a military objective.

It started with the usual incendiary speeches from the opposition, Don Aldo being the spokesman. From the aspect of his personal beauty, he still bore Steve a grudge for his black right eye. Besides he liked talking.

He did it fluently and well. He swore at Steve like the German Minister of Propaganda describing a benevolent neutral. Steve, dangling his legs from the bar counter, listened appreciatively. Then, still smiling good-humoredly, he kicked Don Aldo in the left eye, thus improving the symmetry of the Ortini's appearance.

After that, the lid was off.

AT THE same instant that Steve's swinging right foot made contact with the Don's left eye, Steve made a kind of back somersault which landed him in an intrenched position behind the bar counter. It was an obviously sound maneuver, and he had planned it in detail while the Don was still outlining his moral shortcomings.

During the brief moment while the main body of the enemy were mobilizing their forces, Steve had only the bartender to deal with. He dealt with him according to schedule, capturing in the process a valuable piece of artillery: namely, the heavy service automatic for which the man had made a frantic and futile grab.

A nicely timed left hook to the man's jaw, and the Conquistador bartender served no more drinks that evening.

Meanwhile, however, the advanced enemy patrols were swarming on to the bar counter, a business-like glint in their eyes. Steve calculated that he could hold his advantageous position at best for about two minutes, and determined to make good use of the time.

"Gentlemen," he protested, reaching down bottles from the shelf, "one at a time. Please . . ."

The dock laborer whom Steve had jostled at the bar some moments ago and who had been itching to get at Steve ever since had the misfortune to be the first over the top.

"What's yours?" Steve suggested pleasantly. "A large brandy?"

And he brought the brandy bottle in his right hand sharply down on the man's head. There was a howl of pain and the man rolled heavily on to the floor, gargling the largest shot of brandy of his career.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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When the Pack Gathered

The unusual story of how a dog had to decide between his new, tremendous duty and the promptings of his wild and ancient blood

By JIM KJELGAARD

Author of "Fox in the Bag," "The Red Bull Bellows," etc.

EXCEPT for the splash of white that reached from his breast around his neck, the thin muzzle he had inherited from his collie mother, and his great size, the dog could have been taken for a wolf.

The dim, cold glow of the moon and the stars showed in black relief the squat barn he had just left and the log house in which Jake Hickok lay feverish and half-delirious. Jake had been sick four days. He had a beginning pneumonia that was rapidly growing worse because he had to go outside to attend the cattle.

The dog sat down. His duty lay with Jake Hickok and the ten dry cows and bull in the barn. Since puppyhood, when Jake had dug him out of a den where his mother had thought her pups would be safe, the dog had been trained to guard and watch those cattle. He did not forget and never would forget.

The huge bear reared high as the wolves closed in

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But the cattle were safe in the barn. Stumbling out of the house, Jake had locked them there when the dog had brought them in at dusk. It was no part of the dog's job to watch them after they were in the barn. And every night for two weeks—since the wolf pack had come back to the Genading Hills—their hunting calls drifting down to the dog had driven him nearly mad.

During those fourteen nights, while the dog had lain inside the house, he had not been aware of Jake Hickok's woodman's eyes on him. But Jake saw and understood. The dog was half-wolf, must respond to the summons of the gathering pack. Tonight, for the first time, he had opened the door and let the dog slip into the night.

Once more the dog looked back toward the house, its windows dark and frost crystals on the roof sending a million dancing beams of light back into the moon. The low hills lay, black and ghostly, under the moon. The dog trotted a little way back toward the house.

Then a wolf call rolled from the top of a hill.

The dog whirled as though struck. Forgotten now was any thought of returning to the house. The moon, the spell of the night made for hunting, and the wolf call had him in their grip. The dog sat down, curled his bushy tail about his legs, and lifted his pointed muzzle to the sky as an answer to the tantalizing call poured from his furry throat.

He got up, looked eagerly at the hill from which the call had come, and was away toward it. A dodging black shape in the dim light, he went from the open valley into the spruce woods which the light did not enter. His blood rushed with a wild and exhilarating freedom. Last night he had been tame, a creature subservient to the will of Jake Hickok. Tonight he was free, a wild thing.

He came to the top of the hill, stopped there. Wolf scent was strong. Again the dog sent the mournful call rolling from his throat. Every muscle was taut. Every nerve alert.

Then, as softly and silently as though a ghost were treading there, the brush moved. A wolf stood ten feet from the dog. He was an old male, big and battle-scarred. His head was low and his tail stiff. The dog moved warily as the wolf took a step toward him. Then the dog saw the other six wolves, a silent circle about the two.

And the dog knew what he would have to do. A place in the pack would not be given to him. He would have to fight the old male, the leader of the pack. If he won, he himself would be leader. If he lost, he would die.

THE dog weighed eighty-six pounds, ten pounds more than the wolf, but he lacked the wolf's fighting experience. What he did have was a canny brain, a mixture of dog intelligence and wolf instinct. And he was not afraid. In him all those surging forces that had lain half-dormant while he lived with Jake Hickok came alive. He was a wolf, intended to run with the wolf pack and hold his own.

The wolf took another step toward him. The dog watched and let him come. In wild battles, as well as in those engineered by men, the defensive fighter has the advantage. In a mighty forward lunge and a sideways leap the wolf came. He slashed as he leaped, a raking slash with pointed tusks that would have torn the side of the dog's neck had he stood to meet it.

But, scarcely moving from his tracks, the dog crouched and let the wolf go over him. The wolf's teeth cut through the fur on the dog's shoulder into the flesh underneath. The dog felt hot blood that welled from the wound.

The wolf drew back, less cautious now. He had not given the dog the mortal wound he had wanted to; nevertheless, the dog had been easily wounded. Studying the dog, the wolf plotted his next attack. He knew that he could kill the dog. For four years he had killed everything he had fought. Not even moose and elk had been able to stand against him.

When the wolf came leaping forward again, the dog met him squarely. They

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reared, paws flashing and fangs gaping. The dog gave ground, and the wolf pressed forward to seize the advantage, straining for a throat hold.

Deliberately the dog let himself collapse on the ground and the wolf fell on top of him. The wolf laid a gash open along the dog's ribs and his head came up over the dog's ready jaws.

The dog's head darted in. His teeth closed over the wolf's throat. For a second the wolf's jugular pulsed and was alive. Then the dog's teeth met through it and the wolf spilled his life on the ground.

From the pack came a soft howl, applause for the victor. A sleek wolf came out of the brush, touched noses with the dog, and leaped back. Another came, and another, until finally all six had touched noses with the dog. They waited expectantly.

The dog stood another second over the dead wolf. Then, at a mad run, he started up the ridge. The pack streamed after him. The dog was the new leader of the pack and it was up to him to lead his followers to game.

Halfway up the ridge, a mile from where he had killed the wolf, the dog crossed a bear track. It was a big bear, and it had lumbered through the brush and rubbish on the forest floor, turning aside only for trees. The six wolves brought up behind the dog and waited respectfully while he sniffed the track. Then the dog went on. The bear was too dangerous for the pack to tackle.

A little farther on a terrified buck got from his bed in the spruces and leaped away. Without breaking stride the dog opened cry and turned on the hot scent. The wolves joined him and the echoes of the pack's trail cry hung over the farthest reaches of the Genading Hills.

The buck ran over the ridge, cut across the valley floor, and up the next ridge. Racing as one, unmindful of anything save the hot, enticing scent of the buck, the pack followed. The buck was heading for water, his only chance of escape. But the lake was far away and the buck could not maintain the pace. He was brought to bay in a little copse of spruces on top of the third ridge.

His back against three spruces, head down, the buck faced the pack. The wolves, tongues lolling, ceased their yelling and spread in a silent circle about the buck. The kill belonged to the dog, the leader of the pack. A sleek young wolf padded softly to the buck's flank and made a lightning rush. The buck whirled to meet him and the dog saw his chance.

Straight at the buck's throat he launched himself. His jaws clamped together. Hanging with his forequarters off the ground, the dog ground his teeth in as the buck struggled and threshed. The dog closed his eyes as a spray of hot blood cascaded over his head and neck. The buck wilted to the ground.

The pack feasted on the hot flesh. When all had gorged themselves, they lay down next their kill to sleep. The cold dawn of late autumn was just creeping into a cloud-laden sky when the dog awoke. He shook himself anxiously, and looked at the sleeping wolves. A soft whine was stifled in his throat. He lay down in his bed but his head remained up. Finally he stole away from the sleeping pack.

By night he could be a wolf. But, since puppyhood, his job had been taking care of Jake Hickok's cattle. The dog in him was as strong as the wolf. And by day he had to be a dog.

AFTER a sleepless and pain-ridden night, Jake Hickok met a feverish dawn. He shivered beneath the pile of blankets he had laid on his bed. He got up, stumbled to the fire he had laid before going to bed, and cast a match into it. The kindling crackled and the fire leaped up.

On legs that trembled, and threatened at any moment to collapse, Jake drew a chair as close to the fire as he could get it and sat there trying vainly to get warm. He couldn't give up now. His cattle had to be taken care of and if he rested in the chair for a while he would be able to take care of them.

His head burned, his tongue was a twisted piece of hot rope in his mouth. A half-dozen

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times he assured himself that he would be all right in a couple of days. It was only a passing fever. But that was only lip assurance. In his heart he knew that he was a very sick man.

Always a lover of the wilderness, Jake had spent all the money he had, buying the cattle and building this homestead. The Genading Hills was a fertile country, and Jake knew that in time it would be a rich cattle country. Others would follow his lead. Those who raised cattle in the Genading Hills would do all right.

A little tug of fear pulled at his heart. Not for himself. Men who lived as he did had to leave fear behind. But he had brought the cattle here and was responsible for them. If anything happened to him, they would fall prey to the wolves he had heard nightly in the hills. When Jake had brought the cattle in, he had dreamed of some day having a great herd here in this lost valley. Now . . .

"They ain't got me yet," he muttered. "I'm still alive."

He felt lonesome, lost. He missed the dog much more than he had thought he could. But, understanding the ways of the forest, Jake knew that a dog that wanted to run with wolves could not be prevented from doing so. He wondered where the dog had gone, whether he had been one of the wild pack Jake had heard coursing the hills last night. Maybe the wolves had torn him to bits. Then came a slight scratching at the door. Jake opened it. The dog glided into the cabin.

"Old hound!" Jake exclaimed delightedly. "Old wolf runner! You came back!"

Jake knelt and pressed both arms about the dog's shaggy neck. Somehow, the dog's return restored to Jake a boundless courage, a great confidence. The dog was so big and powerful. In the year he had been watching the cattle not one of them had been harmed in any way.

"Old ranger!" he said ecstatically. "You ran with the pack and came back. Now I guess you've had enough."

He drew away from the dog and looked at him. The dried blood on the dog's head and ruff, the wound in his shoulder and the one on his ribs told their own story. The dog raised a front paw and buried his muzzle in Jake's hand. And Jake saw the conflict raging within the dog—the battle between wolf and dog.

"No," Jake spoke soberly. "You haven't had enough. You'll go back to them because you can't help it. I know why you came back. You couldn't forget that it's your job to be with me and take care of my cattle. Well, one thing I know. You'll take them out today and bring them back tonight. Come on."

Jake bundled himself in a sheepskin coat and with the dog beside him started for the door. Jake stumbled on the doorstep, but caught himself in time. A million hot needles were piercing his head and eyes. The valley and the low hills revolved, expanded and contracted at a dizzy pace. Jake let the cattle out. He watched them start for the pasture, the dog pacing behind them.

Jake started back to the house. Maybe, if he went to bed and stayed there, he would feel all right by night. Perhaps he could force himself to eat something. A man had to eat if he wanted to keep alive. Ten feet beyond the barn he fell on his face. He rested there, and it seemed to him that he had never known a more comfortable couch.

Then all his fighting instincts reasserted themselves and he started crawling. It seemed to him that he crawled for hours, days. Vaguely he was aware of big, feathery flakes of snow whitening the earth about him. He must crawl on, on to the pastures and bring the cattle back. Then he felt strong arms about him.

"My God, Jake! What happened to ye?"

Jake opened his eyes. Dancing before them he saw the face of Scotty McNorr, who lived four miles away on the Broken River. Scotty was his nearest neighbor, and there was no telling what had brought him over today.

"Gotta get muh cattle, Scotty," Jake mumbled. "Gotta go get 'em."

"Mon, ye're sick!" Scotty cried. "Ye need a doctor, an' that quick!"

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"Can't leave," Jake protested. "Muh cattle out there. Cattle with dog, wolf dog."

He shook his head.

"Ye need nae worry," Scotty promised. "If ye come wi' me to the hospital, let me take ye there, I'll come back the night an' care for your cattle."

A great peace stole over Jake Hickok's face. "Will ye, Scotty? Will ye do that?"

"That I will," Scotty promised firmly.

Scotty intended to do as he promised. But he could not foresee that, fighting his way back from the Broken River hospital in the blizzard that the few flakes of snow was to become, he was to slip in a treacherous pot hole and wrench his ankle so badly that he could not move from his house after he gained it. And there was no one he could reach to send back to the cattle.

IT WAS surprising, the difference that Jake Hickok's absence made in the Genading Hills. When the dog, padding through six inches of fresh snow, brought the cattle in that night, three deer were feeding at the haystack beside the barn. They turned at the dog's approach and fled with their white tails over their backs.

The dog herded the cattle to the barn door and held them there while he waited for Jake Hickok to come and open the door. Jake did not come. The dog glanced anxiously toward the house and, when twilight descended on the Genading Hills, trotted over to it. He reared against the door and sniffed. He got down from the door. Jake wasn't there.

Puzzled, and worried, the dog trotted back to where the cattle, finding no access to the barn, were pulling at the haystack. The dog sat anxiously in the snow and watched. Every night the cattle were locked in the barn. It was his job to see them from the pasture back to the barn. But this night, for some reason he could not understand, Jake Hickok did not come to relieve him of his responsibility.

Twilight changed to night. Then, not from the point of the hill but from the floor of the valley not more than five hundred feet away, the wolf song drifted. The wolves knew, as the deer had known, that Jake Hickok was gone and they could run without fear wherever they chose in the Genading Hills.

The dog felt the answer rise within himself. It was involuntary. The pack gathered at night to hunt. He was their leader. He should be with them. The dog answered the call.

From the wolf already in the valley, from the point of the hill, and from the various other points they had scattered to during the day, the six wolves answered their leader. The dog waited from where he had called. A mighty, primitive hunting thrill coursed through him. Again he was the wolf.

The pack came silently out of the darkness and gathered around the dog. Without fear they stared at the house Jake Hickok had left. Tongues lolling, they looked at the cattle that had bedded down next the haystack. They swept toward them, dripping saliva from their mouths at thought of this easy game.

The dog ran with them.

Then, just as the bull muttered belligerently and a young heifer scrambled hastily to her feet, the wolf madness in the dog's brain dissolved. The cattle were his trust. He had been left to watch them.

A GREAT leap carried him eight feet ahead of the pack. He turned to face them. The wolves hesitated, milled uncertainly. A young wolf jumped from the pack toward the cattle and was met by the dog, snarling. For half a minute the young wolf stood his ground, then melted back into the pack. The bull rumbled again, pawed the ground with his hoof and scraped it with his horn.

As though they were acting on a given signal, the wolves were away. Leaping gray shapes, they melted into the darkness and became nothing. A half-hour later the dog heard their strike cry as they picked up game. He whimpered softly in his throat. More than anything else, he wanted to be with them. But he could not. His first job

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was to see that all was right with the cattle and all was not right with them.

The chase led far. The dog heard the wolves bay to a small lake and lose their quarry there. He heard them questing in the hills as they tried without success to find more game. Restlessly he got up and padded around the bedded cattle. They were quiet, but there was an elusive, far-off scent in the air that did not seem right, threatened danger. The dog tried to place it and could not. Then, just before dawn, he caught the scent in full.

The bear whose trail the pack had crossed last night was an old rogue black bear. Other bears in the Genading Hills had denned up for the winter, but the old bear entered the winter with lean sides. If he hibernated, he would not live through the winter. Made vicious by hunger, the old bear had more than once studied Jake Hickok's cattle. Intense hunger had not yet driven him to risking Jake's presence. But, like the deer and wolves, he knew that Jake was no longer there.

Still, some fear remained. Cautiously the old bear came down off the point of hill to stop in the valley. Long and carefully he scented toward the house. He crossed the wolf tracks, but wolves did not worry him especially. There was no man in the house. The bear was sure of it. Urged by hunger, he started toward the cattle.

The dog met the bear in the center of the valley, two hundred feet from the cattle. He growled warningly. The bear stopped, sat back on his haunches while he looked at the dog in his path. The bear was worried. Not because of the dog, whom he did not fear, but because there might be a man lurking somewhere close and the dog's growl might bring him out.

Again the bear started forward, slapping at the dog with a heavy paw. The dog leaped aside, drove in at the bear's flank. The wind carried a loose board from the side of the house. When it fell, the bear thought it was the man coming back. The bear turned, and at a lumbering gallop fled back into the hills and the forest.

He still did not fear the dog.

THE wind was stronger next morning. Carrying a knife edge, it whistled up the valley and cut into every living thing in its path. For an hour the cattle lay on the lee side of the haystack. Finally the wind penetrated even there. Led by the bull, and followed by the dog, the cattle started toward a little side valley that was more out of the wind.

Most of the morning the dog lay on a high stone ledge overlooking the valley. The cattle pulled listlessly at the frozen grass and weeds sticking above the snow, or lay motionless in beds. The valley was moderately calm, as the cattle had known it would be.

The bull, surly at not having been let into the barn, prodded alone a little apart from the main herd. With his front hoof he pawed the snow away and licked at the grass beneath. The dog watched him carefully.

Almost the first thing he had learned, when Jake Hickok had taught him how to herd, was to keep the cattle together. But the bull could not go far. The valley was narrow and rocky. Toward its head it narrowed to eight feet and opened up again into a small pocket about a hundred feet wide with nearly sheer rock walls. The bull could not stray beyond that.

Daylight brought the dog peace. He was untormented by the wild and fierce desires that goaded him so at night. The wolf pack, never forgotten, was thrust into the background of thought. The night would bring again the mad impulse to lead the pack—the dog stirred as he remembered how the hot blood of the buck had drenched him—but the night was far away.

The bull bedded down. The dog curled his tail around his nose and slept lightly. He was hungry, but could not take time to hunt while he was with the herd. Tonight perhaps he could either hunt, break into the meat cache on the porch, or—best of all—Jake Hickok might be back to feed him. Five times during the day the dog padded around the cattle. All was well each time and he returned to his bed.

The sixth time he arose it was nearly

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night and a drifting bit of scent from across the valley brought him to his feet. The dog growled, and stood on the rock facing into the wind. He saw the bear coming down the side of the valley. Tails over their backs, the cattle galloped awkwardly up the valley into the pocket where they were trapped. The bull heaved himself humpily to his feet, bellowed defiance at the bear, and trod slowly after the cattle.

The dog flashed down into the valley and planted himself squarely in front of the bear. He snarled warningly, and slipped aside when the bear kept coming. The dog leaped in from the bear's flank, slashed, and was away. The bear whirled to strike with a club-like paw and continued toward the cattle. The dog closed in, nipped at the bear's hindquarters. With an angry little bawl the bear whipped around to strike again.

He hit the dog a glancing blow on the ribs. The dog tumbled end over end in the snow. Stunned, he lay a few seconds. When he got up, the bear had gained a hundred and fifty feet toward the pocket. The bull, head sweeping the ground, stood squarely in the center of the narrow opening into the pocket.

THE dog's left side throbbed painfully where the bear had struck him. His left front leg was stiffly numb. Increased clumsiness made him warier, but he fought the bear all the way up the little valley. Twilight descended. The bear was within ten yards of the embattled bull now. He walked carefully, eyeing the bull.

With a rush the dog flung himself on the bear's hindquarters. The bear turned, angrily determined to rid himself of this tormentor. With crushing, ponderous blows he struck time after time at the dog, following him up as the dog retreated. Snarling in the bear's face, the dog kept just out of reach of these bone-smashing paws. At that moment, the bull charged.

His massive head struck the bear squarely broadside. With a prodigious grunt the bear went down in the snow. But, with an agility born of steel-hard muscles, he was up again and roaring mad. The bull had lowered his head and was bellowing throatily. The bear charged, just as the dog again attacked from the rear. The bear struck the bull a glancing blow in the neck.

Landing solidly, the blow would have broken the bull's neck. As it was, it sent him to his knees and dazed him. The bear turned to the dog. Shaking his battered head, the bull resumed his place at the opening into the pocket. He pawed the ground as he bellowed his battle challenge.

Keeping just out of reach, the dog lured the bear fifty feet down the valley. The dog knew that the fight could have only one end if no help came. The bull and himself could hold their own for a while. But in the end both of them and the rest of the cattle would be killed. They were Jake Hickok's cattle. Since puppyhood the dog's job had been to keep them safe.

When the bear turned back toward the cattle, the dog sat on his haunches and sent the wolf call rolling forth. He had rallied the pack once. Perhaps he could do it again.

From back in the hills a wolf answered.

THE pack, when they came, did not plunge directly into the valley. They scented the bear, and for a moment sat on the rim of the valley with lolling tongues and bright eyes. The hot scent of the terrified cattle drifted to them strongly. A lean wolf licked his chops.

None of the pack had eaten last night and all were famished. Silently they streamed down the side of the valley to arrange themselves in a semi-circle about the dog who had summoned them. Their stomachs empty, they would fight even the bear to get at the cattle.

Step by step the bull had given ground. When the pack arrived he stood with lowered head a little beyond the narrow opening into the pocket facing the bear, who stood squarely in the center of the opening. The bear turned sideways in the opening so that he could meet instantly an attack from either way. The six wolves and the dog together made a formidable enemy,

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and ordinarily the bear might have run from them. But his own belly was empty and he would not abandon the cattle he had cornered.

The bull was silent now; he seemed enthralled by what had taken place and what was about to take place. His head still low, he retreated five steps more. A young wolf leaped at the bear, and when he was almost on him, tried to swerve past the bear into the pocket. The bear cuffed once, and the young wolf flew through the air to land in the snow, his back broken.

Led by the dog, the pack closed in. Suddenly, without giving any wolf an opening to get by him, the bear hurled his ponderous bulk toward them. His front paw fastened in the back of another wolf. Ignoring the furious attack of the rest, he drew the wolf to him, clamped his huge forearms about it. After a bit he threw the lifeless wolf from him, slapping at another that tried to get past to the cattle.

But the bear was not alone in victory. While he had been killing, wolf jaws had been working, teeth snapping. The bear's belly, where the hair was lightest, was ripped. From a wound in his neck blood dripped to make a red puddle in the snow. The bear reared in the narrow opening, then dropped again to all fours.

Throughout the fight the dog had been side by side with a lean old wolf which had not even come close to being hurt. Veteran of many battles, the old wolf knew how to keep herself safe.

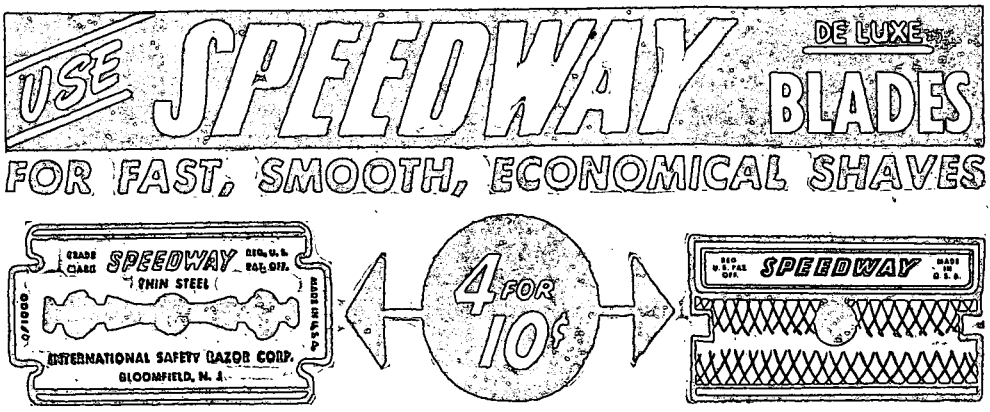
Then a heifer, crazed by fear, careened toward the opening of the pocket, to stop short almost within striking distance of the bear; and the pack went berserk. They flung themselves recklessly on the bear. Another wolf with a broken back was hurled from the melee to land in the snow.

Over and over, the bear, the dog, and the two remaining wolves rolled. The bear brought up on his back, a hairy forepaw wrapped about each of the two wolves. The dog attacked furiously as the bear squeezed, and was ignored. Tighter the bear brought his paws against his chest. The wolf in his right paw went limp.

But the old wolf that had fought beside the dog, though trapped, was a fighter to the last. The bear gripped her just ahead of her hind legs. But her jaws were free, and while the bear was crushing her, her teeth were slowly grinding into his neck. Deeper she chewed, and deeper. Then at last a spray of blood cascaded over her as the jugular was reached and the bear relaxed his hold. The old wolf fell from his chest, pulled herself a few steps with her front paws, and sank in the snow.

The bull bellowed deep in his throat. It was a trumpet call, a tribute to valiant fighters who would never fight again. Limping, the dog followed the little herd home. That night the cattle again bedded near the haystack.

And it was there that Jake Hickok found them all safe when he came home a month later.



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Traitor's Arrow

Men of the Highlands, take up your arms! Tomorrow you march to battle for Scotia; and the man who leads you has drunk the heady brew of the gods. . . . Another stirring novelet of Odin's Magic Cup

By PHILIP KETCHUM

Author of "Wolf of the North," "The Course of Empire," etc.

I

IN THE shadows of the great eastern wall of the fortress at Nairn, two young men were wrestling. They had stripped off all their clothing and their naked bodies glistened with sweat. They seemed well matched, for though the more swarthy of the two was heavier and taller and longer of arm, the other man was more quick and agile and more deft in his movements.

A group of warriors from the fortress were watching the struggle, laying bets with each other as to the outcome. They shouted encouragement to both men, and suddenly a short, stooped, heavily bearded man cried: "Watch him, Culen! Watch him or he'll have ye!"

The heavier man, slipping an arm swiftly between the legs of his opponent, jerked him from his feet, swung his body into the air and flung it over his head. Then with a victorious shout he turned to pounce on the fallen man. It looked, in that moment, as though the end of the fight had come; yet even as the heavier man threw himself forward, Culen rolled away, crouched, then fell across the heavier man's back.

"I have ye, Grim," he panted. "Break this hold if ye can?"

His arms had locked around the heavier man's neck and his legs around Grim's stomach. Grim thrashed his body back and forth on the sand, stood up and fell over backward. He fastened his huge hands on Culen's arms and tried to tear them away. His face darkened with the effort and from the tightening pressure around his throat.

"Culen has him!" the men were shouting. "Culen has him! Culen is the victor!"

For as long as there was any strength left in his body, Grim tried to break that hold, but his efforts grew weaker and weaker and he finally signaled that he had lost. Culen's arms fell away, then, and his legs slid from around Grim's body.

He didn't get up from the ground, however, nor did Grim. They lay there side by side, drawing in deep breaths of air, staring up at the clear blue sky and waiting for the pounding blood in their veins to calm down a little. Some of the warriors moved away but others stood around, talking of the match, fighting it over in their words.

"I did not think ye could ever whip me," Grim muttered suddenly. "Yet ye did it fair, Culen. Ye have arms like bands of iron. My neck will never be the same again."

Culen turned on his side. " 'Twas luck, Grim. I could not do it again."

"And I have no wish to try it again," Grim answered. "At least today."

He sat up while he was speaking, began to rub the sand from his broad shoulders and thick arms. Culen watched him thoughtfully. In all Torland, he decided,

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there wasn't a stronger man than this young giant with whom he had just fought. He couldn't believe that it was anything but luck which had made him the victor.

"I KNOW," said Grim suddenly, turning his dark eyes on Culen. "Ye have been drinking from Odin's cup. That is where ye got the strength to beat me."

"Nay, Grim. I have not touched the cup. But what if I had? It is only a drinking horn, nothing more."

"The legend says—"

"What care I for the legend?"

Grim scowled. "Ye would not fear the curse of the gods?"

Culen stared up at the sky. The cup to which Grim had referred belonged to the Dougal, his father. It had been brought here to Torland by the first Dougal, who, according to the story, had taken it from King Harald Haarfagre of Norway. The cup was never used, for though a draft from it was supposed to endow a man with the strength and wisdom of the gods, it saddled him also with a curse.

Culen had laughed at the legend, yet once when he had held Odin's cup in his hand he had seemed to hear a voice whispering the curse in his ears. And he had put the cup away.

"Here is your serk," Grim muttered, throwing him the garment. "Ye have rested long enough."

Culen hurled the Viking leader at his gaping followers

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Culen stood up, brushed the loose sand from his body and drew on his serk. He had long, fair hair, as fine in texture as a woman's. His eyes were blúe and steady and suited well the usually sober expression of his thin, sun-tanned face. At the side of Grim he did not seem large, yet there were few other men in Torland, or in all Scotia, for that matter, who were taller than he or more broad of shoulder.

The two men dressed silently, donning knee-length leather breeches and short coats of mail which were caught at the waist by jewel-studded belts. A sword and knife were fastened to the belts. They wore nothing on their feet and they left their heads uncovered.

"Think ye the Dougal will be back tonight?" Grim asked suddenly.

Culen frowned, shrugged his shoulders. His father had left almost a score of days before to visit Malcolm, the king of Scotia. Word had come to him that Malcolm had decided to include Torland in the area ruled by the Thane of Moray, that Malcolm had decided not to recognize their right as a free and independent clan.

"The Dougal should be back tonight," Culen said slowly. "He should have been back several nights ago. I wish that he had let us go with him."

"Ye are worried, Culen?"

"Aye."

"Men say that Malcolm is a wise and fair ruler."

Culen shrugged, turned and started toward the gate in the east wall of the fortress.

THE Dougal returned to Nairn that afternoon, yet in a manner which none had expected. He came borne on a litter by four of the warriors who had accompanied him on his visit to the king. His arms were folded across his breast and near one of his hands was the feathered end of the shaft which had taken his life.

Culen saw the company approaching the fortress from the bridge over the Nairn River, and with others he hurried to meet it. Finlegh, a tall, scarred warrior who strode at the litter's side, signaled those who were carrying it to stop as soon as he saw Culen. To Culen's harsh inquiry, "What man did it?" he shook his head.

"One hired to murder him by the king?" Culen demanded.

"Nay, Culen," Finlegh answered. "At least I think not."

"Where did it happen?"

"In the forest beyond Loch Ardin. None of us saw the arrow's flight, nor though we searched did we find him from whose bow it was sped. The forest guarded its secret well."

Culen looked from face to face of those who had gone with his father. All were men whom he had known from his early youth, men whom he knew his father had trusted. One after another nodded and Finlegh went on to tell more of his father's death, of its suddenness and of the search for the murderer.

When the tale was finished Culen slowly nodded his head. He was aware of an unaccustomed thickness in his throat. "Bear him to the fortress," he ordered.

No mere thane's castle was this fortress at Nairn. Its walls were thick and high and its gates were strong. It enclosed a small village where a thousand men and their families might have been quartered and its storehouses were well filled with food. It had been built two score years before as a defense against raiding sea-rovers and it had withstood many a siege.

In the center of the fortress village was its kirk and it was there that the Dougal's body was carried. A priest, known to the men of Torland as Father Stephen, was responsible for that. He met the company at the gate, made the sign of the cross in the air, mumbled something in his strange tongue which none of them could understand, and then said, "Follow me."

Culen's face darkened at that command but he did not oppose it. It was at his father's order that the kirk had been built and it was his father who had first accepted the teachings of this man, Father Stephen. Others had followed in the footsteps of the Dougal, taking a new god

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called Christ in place of Odin and Thor, and signalizing this step through a curious ceremony in the waters of the Forth of Moray. And as Father Stephen led the way to the kirk, Culen had the sudden feeling that his father would have liked this, could he have known about it.

The Dougal's body was lowered to the floor in front of the altar and Father Stephen lit oiled tapers and fixed them in brackets, one at the Dougal's head and another at his feet. Again the priest moved his arm in the sign of the cross and started talking in his strange, unintelligible tongue. For a while the warriors who had come into the kirk stood around with bowed heads, then one by one they began to leave until only Culen remained.

Hardly aware of the voice of the priest, Culen looked down at his father's body, wondering what hand had loosed the fatal shaft; what man, unless it were the king, could have desired his death. On a sudden impulse he stooped over and broke off the feathered end of the shaft.

"Ye are thinking of revenge," said Father Stephen quietly. "Yet this is the teaching of Christ, that ye love one another, even thine enemy."

Culen stiffened. "If that be the teaching of the Christ, then I care not for it."

Father Stephen was tall and thin. He seemed little more than skin and bone. Staring at him now, Culen decided that all of the man's power lay in his eyes. There was something about the look in them that was at first startling and then compelling. Culen had a sudden feeling that Father Stephen could see into his mind, read his most secret thoughts.

A faint smile touched the priest's lips. "Ye are young, Culen," he murmured. "Young and hot-blooded. Yet now that thy father is dead, ye are the Dougal. Think well what that means before ye would lead thy people into battle."

Culen scowled. Outside the kirk he could hear a sudden, excited shouting. The priest seemed aware of it too for he looked up toward the door.

"The Dougal," Culen said slowly. "I had not thought to be the Dougal for many years."

"Thy father, Culen," said the priest abruptly, "told me once how ye came to call this country Torland. He told me of a man named Tor who sought for his people a place where they might live in peace, who directed the first Dougal to these shores. Thy father, instead of defying King Malcolm, went to see him to sue for peace. Can ye do any less?"

Culen's scowl deepened but what answer he might have made he never knew for just then the kirk door burst open and Grim's voice called in to him, shouting:

"Vandals, Culen! In a hundred ships they are sweeping up the Forth. I have made out the banner of Sigurd."

GRIM needed to say no more. Vandals! It was a word at which every man in Torland would spring to arms, for it meant that once more the sea-raiders were ravaging the coast of Scotia.

Culen swung around, raced for the door. He hurried outside and over to the wall, mounted it and stared out across the Forth. And he saw at once that Grim's warning had not been amiss.

A stiff breeze was driving the Viking ships rapidly toward the shore. Even now a few of them were beaching. They were large ships, some with perhaps as many as a hundred warriors aboard.

Culen's eyes turned to the village outside the fortress. In a steady stream, men, women and children were making their way toward the security of its thick, high walls. Most of them were carrying bundles. A few of the men were driving small herds of cattle toward the enclosure.

Finlegh, Scanlan and a few of the older warriors joined Culen on the wall and Culen heard Finlegh mutter, "Aye, it is Sigurd from the Orkneys. I would it were any other man, even Sweyn."

Culen managed a short laugh. He had heard of both Sigurd and Sweyn and could see little difference between them. Each, for years, had made raid after raid on the coast of Scotia, pillaging and burning un-

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defended towns, escaping before an army could march against them.

"There must be ten thousand men on those ships," whispered Scanlan. "Never before have we withstood such a number."

Culen said nothing. He noticed that the last people from the outside village had come through the gates and that the gates had been closed. He watched while more and more disembarked from their ships. And then after a short space of time he saw a group of two score Vikings separate from the others, pick their way through the sand dunes which lined the beach and come over to one of the trails which led up the high bank of land to the level of the plain.

"Sigurd is the large one," said Finlegh. "He with the gold belt and helmet. But I wonder why so few come on alone?"

"Perhaps to talk with us," said Culen. "Choose as many men as they have, Finlegh. No more. We will meet them outside the gate."

" 'Twere better to take twice as many," said Finlegh.

Culen shook his head. He turned down from the wall and moved over toward the east gate. Grim brought him a helmet and shield, fell in beside him. Grim's face showed his excitement.

A SCORE of paces beyond the gate the two groups came face to face and the difference between them was easily apparent. The men of Torland were silent and watchful, sober of expression save for Grim and a few of the younger men.

Most of the Vandals were grinning. They carried themselves with an easy air of confidence. They were fair-haired men, all heavily armored and well armed. Sigurd, their leader, wore a helmet of gold and over his shoulders a crimson cloak. His belt was broad and well studded with jewels. He carried a battle-ax in an almost negligent manner.

"Who speaks for yonder fortress?" he demanded abruptly.

Culen straightened, stepped forward a pace. "I do."

"What! A beardless youth!"

Several of the Vandals laughed and Sigurd, too, seemed to find the situation amusing. But the smile which came to his ruddy face quickly left it.

"We seek new lands," he said bluntly, "and this place is to our liking. We wish no trouble. Surrender yonder fortress to us and all your people may leave without harm. Ye have seen our number. If ye resist us, ye do so at your own peril. I give ye until tomorrow at dawn to make an answer."

A sharp answer rose to Culen's lips but he choked it back as Finlegh touched him on the shoulder and said under his breath: "Steady, Culen. How can we stand against so many? Perhaps 'twere better—"

Culen shook off Finlegh's hand. He moved forward until he stood directly in front of Sigurd, smiled easily and said: "I can give ye our answer now. In this manner."

As he spoke he stooped over slightly, stretched out one arm and caught Sigurd between the legs, slipped the other arm over the Vandal's shoulder. Sigurd gave a startled cry, stiffened, tried to break free; but Culen, straightening, swung the Vandal's body high in the air above his head. This was the trick he had learned that afternoon from Grim, yet now he varied it. He didn't cast Sigurd's body behind him, but instead threw it ahead, straight into the faces of those who had come with him.

"There is my answer," he shouted. "How like ye it?"

So sudden and unexpected and so brief had been that struggle that few of the Vandals knew just what had happened. They had seen the body of their leader lifted into the air by this beardless youth, and for a moment they stood amazed and unmoving. But then the sight of their fallen leader brought angry shouts to their lips; swords out and flailing, they charged forward.

"Back to the fortress!" Culen cried. "Let our walls fight for us. Back to the fortress!"

There was authority in his voice and

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the men of Torland, who had moved to meet the Vandals' charge, began to give ground. Then at another order from Culen they broke and raced for the gate. All of them made it and the gate was closed. Outside, the Vandals shouted in rage and hammered at the gate.

The siege was on.

II

ON THE level, sandy plain around the fortress of Nairn the Vandals made their camp. By night a thousand campfires brightened the sky and from the village outside the walls where the leaders had made their headquarters, came the sound of wild carousals. Each day foraging expeditions set off for the hills, some to penetrate a great distance and be gone for a long time, others to scour the surrounding country for food. More Viking ships came up the Forth of Moray to bring additional warriors to join Sigurd's standard.

During those first thirty days a score of assaults on the walls of the fortress had been repulsed and Culen thought that many more attempts could be turned back. But he was worried, mainly because the men of Torland seemed worried.

Each night at dusk a messenger from Sigurd would come close to the fortress gate and recite Sigurd's offer to let them depart in peace if they would surrender the fortress the next morning. And some of the men, he felt, were beginning to think that such a step would be wise. It was whispered that they could not hold out here forever and that King Malcolm would never come to the rescue of the men of Torland. He would wait until the Vandals had destroyed them.

Nor could Culen understand why King Malcolm had not come to their aid. Malcolm's hatred for the Northmen was well known. He had sworn that so long as he was king of Scotia they would never gain a foothold in the land he ruled.

It was during the evening of that thirtieth day, just after Sigurd's messenger had made his usual offer and had heard the usual refusal, that Finlegh, Scanlan, and a group of the older warriors sought out Culen. At the sight of them he stiffened, suddenly afraid that they might demand that Sigurd's offer be accepted. But at their first words he knew that he had been wrong.

"It has come to our minds," said Finlegh, "that perhaps Malcolm does not know the numbers of the Vandals. He may believe that this attack on Nairn is merely a raid."

"What do ye mean?" Culen asked.

"Malcolm knows," Finlegh continued, "that our fathers came from the north. He looks on us as uncivilized, as men beneath his contempt. If he had heard of a raid on our coast he would not be bothered, yet if he knew that Sigurd had brought ten thousand men with him he would see the danger to all Scotia. If we sent him a message—"

"How could any messenger get through?"

Finlegh straightened. "He could try. I would be willing to make the attempt."

"Or I," cried several of the others.

Culen nodded; Finlegh's reasoning might be right. With ten thousand men Sigurd well might try to conquer all of Scotia.

"Tonight, then," said Finlegh, "I will have myself lowered from the wall. I will—"

But Culen shook his head. "Nay, Finlegh. Tonight I will be lowered from the wall."

"But ye are the Dougal, our leader."

"And as such should be the one to go. It remains to ye, Finlegh, to take my place here. And this is my command: that the gates of Nairn shall never be opened until I return with Malcolm's men. Now find Grim and send him to me."

GRIM was not long in coming, and his first words as he entered the room where Culen waited were these: "I go with ye."

Culen shook his head. "Nay, I go alone. It was for another purpose that I sent for ye."

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"For what purpose?"

Culen turned to a cabinet on the wall, opened it and drew forth a drinking horn.

"The cup of Odin," Grim breathed.

Culen laughed a little uneasily. "So it is called. See ye anything strange about it?"

The drinking horn was fashioned much as any other drinking horn. It was cast of a curiously blue metal and on it were inscribed many runic figures. What they signified, Culen didn't know. A base of dull, red wood supported the horn, wood which Culen's father had said came from the Yingling tree, the tree of life.

Grim reached for the cup, stared at it. "'Tis very heavy," he muttered. "Have ye drunk from it, Culen?"

Culen shook his head. "Nay, Grim, yet the other night I took it in my hand, lifted it to my lips and it seemed suddenly to be filled with some liquid. Then, though I was alone in here, I heard a voice speaking to me, warning me not to drink."

Culen reached out his hand for the drinking horn. He said, "Listen, Grim. See if you can hear it, too." And then he lifted the horn slowly toward his lips and just as on the other evening he heard the voice again.

"Nay, Culen. Do not drink."

"Did ye hear it?" he whispered to Grim.

Grim had stiffened, was looking from side to side. He needed to make no answer. Culen stared at the drinking horn. Though a moment before it had been empty, it now seemed filled to the rim. He lifted it nearer to his lips and once more then he heard that warning voice, speaking now in a kind of chant:

"Accursed is he who drinks from Odin's cup,
Who steals the strength and wisdom of the gods,
For by fair Asgard this shall be his lot,
To cherish freedom but to know it not,
To search for peace, yet ever live in strife,
Companion to sorrow and to death,
Through life."

As the chant ended a sudden chill swept over Culen's body bringing with it a premonition of disaster. But he forced a laugh, and then, even while Grim cried out to him, he lifted the drinking horn to his lips, threw back his head and drank.

Curiously warm and sweet was the draft in that cup, and unlike anything Culen had ever before tasted. It seemed to be tingling through his blood to every part of his body, carrying a new strength with it. He forgot that he was tired, that a little while before worry had been heavy upon him. Grim was clutching his arm, staring at him as though frightened.

"Ye heard the voice," said Culen.

"Aye, and I would have stopped ye. Those words—"

Culen's laugh interrupted what Grim might have said. He didn't feel much different than he had before—certainly he felt no wiser—yet he was aware of a growing desire to test himself, to see if there were any magic in the draft he had taken.

"Come with me to the wall, Grim," he suggested. "I go to see King Malcolm and I wonder what Vandals will try to stop me."

"I go with ye, Culen," Grim said stubbornly.

Culen shook his head, then shrugged. He had a feeling that nothing that he would say could stop Grim from accompanying him. When Grim set his mind on a thing, he did not turn back.

Together they mounted the wall.

LOW, scudding clouds hid the stars and the moon that night, and the earth lay blanketed in a darkness which even the campfires of the Vandals could not drive away. Grim had marked in his mind a course through the surrounding camp by which he thought they might escape detection, and not a single voice challenged them as they followed it.

They reached the bank of the river Nairn, continued along it for several leagues and then turned east through a heavy forest and toward a place where Culen hoped to find horses. With the coming of the dawn they were mounted and riding south.

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During that first day they passed through a country which had been scoured and ravaged by Sigurd's men. Farm houses had been burned and cattle driven off. Small villages were smouldering ruins with the dead unburied in the streets. Nowhere was there a sign of any living thing.

"Some of the men must have escaped to the hills," Grim muttered.

Culen said nothing. He had watched foraging expeditions come and go from the Vandals' camp, but he hadn't thought to find the country beyond Nairn as desolate as this.

"Word of this raid must have reached the king," Grim continued.

But still Culen made no answer except to lift his horse to a gallop.

Twice in the two days which followed they secured new mounts and on the evening of that second day they came to a small town filled with soldiers. The country through which they had just passed had been rugged and hilly and these were the first people they had seen. Culen's first thought was that these soldiers were an advance guard of King Malcolm's army, and he sought out the captain commanding them.

"We come from Nairn in Torland," Culen said, "where Sigurd the Vandal with ten thousand men lays siege to our fortress. The country all around has been ravaged and he boasts that he has come to stay."

The captain of the troop was a short, heavy-set man with a thin, red beard and dark, nervous eyes. "Ten thousand men ye say?" he repeated. "We heard of a raid by the Vandals but not that so many had come. Are ye sure—"

Culen said coldly, "Ye heard me. It is Culen the Dougal who speaks, Thane of Torland. Where is the king?"

The captain blinked. "At his hunting lodge near Ben-ormand. I will take ye there. He must hear of this."

THE trail which the captain followed from the town led through a rugged country. They rode one behind the other, the captain and two soldiers leading, then Culen and Grim, and after them another half score of the captain's men. It had been dusk when they left and the early shadows thickened, to be dispelled finally by a round, full moon.

In a clearing several leagues from the town, the captain drew rein. "We must leave our horses here," he said gruffly. "The trail beyond grows steeper."

Culen and Grim dismounted with the others, turned from their horses toward the captain. They had no warning of the attack save for the flashing of the moonlight on bared swords as the captain's men closed in around them. Grim's startled shout was an echo of Culen's cry and his blade was out as swiftly as Culen's, slashing in an arc from side to side.

Culen, too, during the first moment of that attack, could think only of defense. Yet after the first shock of the encounter had passed a seething anger gripped him and drove him forward. His sword was double-edged, heavy and sharp. It caught the blade of one of the soldiers, turned it aside, cut deep into the man's breast, jerked up and slashed at another of the men.

A shout of triumph came from Culen's throat. He turned on another of the soldiers, and then another, smashing their blades aside, cutting them down. The captain turned and fled, one man with him, and Culen started after them. Then he stopped and looked back. Grim, breathing heavily, was leaning on his sword. There was no other man standing in the glen.

"Ye are hurt, Grim?" Culen asked.

Grim shook his head. "I am not hurt, nor are ye. Yet both of us should be dead. Never have I seen a man fight as ye fought, Culen. Your sword seemed to be in two places at once. It cut through men's armor as though it were cloth."

Culen hardly heard him. He was thinking that perhaps other men, seeking the king, might have met the fate that had been intended for them. He was recalling that the captain had very carefully selected these men to accompany them to the king's hunting lodge.

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"Come," he said abruptly. "Let us find this trail to the lodge."

GUARDS were stationed at the doorway to the king's hunting lodge near Benormand, and from within came the sounds of many voices, of laughter and of singing. Culen and Grim came up to the door and found their way barred.

"Who seeks entrance?" demanded one of the guards. "Only the king and members of his court can come in here."

"The Thane of Torland seeks entrance," Culen answered. "Stand aside."

A short laugh came from the guard's throat. "Torland has become a part of Moray. There is no Thane of Torland."

Culen reached out an arm and swept the guard aside, shoving him against another of the guards so heavily that both of them went down. A third man tried to block the entrance but Grim, catching him by the head, tossed him aside. The cries of those three were bringing others to the spot, but Culen and Grim did not wait for them. Pushing open the door, they stepped into the lodge.

Two long tables lined either wall, and at the far end, over an open fire, a hind was roasting. There were perhaps two score men and women in the lodge, thanes of various districts, chieftains of the different clans. Near the throne seat on one side a harpist was playing, and the tables were well heaped with food.

A tall, thin-faced man, twice as old as Culen, sat in the throne seat. Culen started that way. Someone grasped him but he pushed the man aside; then suddenly others rushed at him and guards and soldiers came racing through the door.

But Culen was close to the throne seat now and he didn't try to escape. He saw the tall man leap to his feet, heard him cry out: "Hold! What is this?"

"I bring ye news, King Malcolm," Culen cried. "News ye must hear."

"What news?" demanded the king. "Who are ye?"

"I am Culen the Dougal, Thane of Torland."

A scowl came to the king's face. "There is no Thane of Torland. The people who live there are not of Scotia."

"Many there now are not of Scotia," Culen agreed. "For Sigurd the Vandal and ten thousand of his warriors have landed on that coast. They have ravaged the surrounding country and for food must soon move south—even this far."

Those words brought a sharp silence into the room. "Is this true?" Malcolm demanded harshly.

"Aye."

"Ten thousand men ye say? Not ten hundred?"

"Ten thousand. Perhaps more."

Malcolm looked around to a man who stood at his side, a man fully as tall as he and heavier, a man with a thick, black beard, dark hair and eyes. "Why have I not heard of this, Dundolf?" he asked flatly.

The bearded man shrugged. "I can not think it is true, Sire. We have heard of a raid on Nairn, but not that it was Sigurd the Vandal nor that he had ten thousand men. How can ye believe a man from Torland?"

"Yet Sigurd and Sweyn have sworn that they will conquer Scotia even as the Danes and Northmen have conquered England where Canute rules as king. We have been expecting an attack."

Others in the room nodded at that. Dundolf frowned. "Sigurd would not attack so far to the north."

Culen stared at the bearded man, wondering who he was and whether it was at his order than an attempt had been made to stop him and Grim from reaching the king.

Malcolm straightened. "I am tired of hunting," he decided abruptly. "Tomorrow we will summon the army and ride north to see if this man has told the truth."

Culen felt a deep sense of relief and a smile broke across his face. Yet at the king's next words it vanished.

"As for these two," said the king, pointing at him and Grim. "Hold them as captives until we return. Even if they have

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spoken the truth I would deal with the one who called himself the Thane of Torland. For there is no Thane of Torland. The people who live there are themselves Vandals. Their blood is the blood of the Northmen and in all Scotia we have no place for them."

Culen and Grim had been released a few moments before, but now the soldiers crowded around them, grasped them by shoulder and arm. Against so many, Culen knew that it was hopeless to fight.

As he was dragged from the lodge, he tried to find some satisfaction in the knowledge that the king's army would soon be marching to the relief of Nairn, yet beyond that fact lay the shadow of the king's last words: that in all Scotia there was no place for the people of Torland.

III

THE dungeon cell was dark and evil smelling and the trickle of water which dripped from its wall was foul to the taste. Once each day a guard came to the door and pushed a half-loaf of stale bread through a narrow opening. Culen had tried to talk with the guard, but the surly fellow would answer no questions.

On the fifteenth day, as nearly as Culen could reckon the time, the guard did not appear. Instead a trample of many feet and the rattling of armor sounded from the corridor, and the cell door was suddenly flung open.

It was Culen's thought that King Malcolm had returned and had sent for him as he had promised. But the man who looked into his cell had nothing to say of the king. "Bring this one, too," he ordered. "He looks hardy enough. Perhaps he has not been here long."

Two soldiers came into the cell and helped Culen outside and down the corridor. Though he might have walked alone he let them half carry him, for a sudden fear had gripped him. These men seemed not like the men of Scotia. Their manner of speech was harsh and strange.

In the courtyard of the castle a score of prisoners from the dungeons were assembled. Only a few could stand erect, some looked half-dead. Even Grim, pale and haggard, seemed not at all like the man Culen had known.

Culen turned to one of the guards who stood nearby. "Why have we been brought up here?" he demanded.

The guard shrugged. "Perhaps to be freed, perhaps slain. Only Sigurd knows."

"Sigurd?" Culen gasped.

"Aye. Thought ye that Malcolm was still king?"

Culen drew a long, slow breath. Then Sigurd must have defeated the king and these men here were Vandals. What castle this was, he didn't know, but Sigurd's presence here meant that he must control all this part of the country. And what then of Nairn? Did it still hold out?

A mounted man rode up, swung to the ground and handed the reins of his horse to the guard. "Sigurd is coming," he announced. "Are the men all brought up?"

The guard nodded. "All who were not dead."

Culen looked over at the horse. He moved unsteadily that way, glanced at Grim. Grim was watching him, and nodded suddenly. Culen took another step toward the horse, reached out and jerked the reins from the guard's hand.

At the man's first cry of alarm Culen swung to the horse's back. Grim was staggering toward him when a spear cast by one of the soldiers caught the big man in the thigh. But Grim came on, his face contorted with pain; and Culen half-dragged him up, steadying him until Grim's arms wrapped around his waist.

The horse reared up on his hind legs as Culen jerked on the reins, trying to swing the animal around. The whole courtyard was now in an uproar. Soldiers were shouting, racing to head them off as the horse turned toward the castle gate. Several spears hurled after them came dangerously close; then, as they reached the castle gate, a company of mounted men appeared just beyond it.

There was no chance to turn back; there

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was no other way by which they might escape. Both Culen and Grim were shouting now and their cries seemed to have frightened the horse. It plunged madly ahead, straight at those men who blocked the way, who were now trying desperately to wheel to one side.

Culen caught a glimpse of Sigurd's face, flushed and startled, and of another face which seemed familiar. Then they were past those men and the horse was galloping down the castle hill. A cloud of arrows rained after them.

WHERE the road forked below, Culen turned north, and when the horse faltered, he drew up and slid to the ground, thinking to take to the hills. Grim dropped down beside him, swaying unsteadily on his feet; he took a step toward the thick underbrush, and then fell forward on his face.

At first Culen didn't see the arrow. He called Grim's name, tried to arouse him, and then his hand touched the end of the feathered shaft. It was driven deep into Grim's back.

Culen drew Grim's body to the shelter of the underbrush, knelt at his side. A body of horsemen galloped past, but he did not look up. "Grim," he whispered. "Grim—"

There was no answer and he knew there would be none. That huge body, so tremendously strong, would not battle at his side again.

Culen broke off the feathered end of the shaft, noting that it was of the same strange fashioning as the arrow which had killed his father. As he got slowly to his feet, he heard in his memory the words of that warning voice which had spoken when he had lifted Odin's cup to his lips. "Companion to sorrow and to death," he muttered. "Companion to sorrow and to death."

What he had gained through drinking from that cup he didn't know. Perhaps a greater strength and endurance. He didn't feel nearly so tired or exhausted now as he should feel. But no matter what the gain, this price was too much.

For a long time Culen stood there, looking down at Grim. Then finally he turned away and started north alone. But his cup of sorrow was not yet filled. Before the next night he learned what had happened at Nairn. A man whom he met in the hills told him.

Nairn had held out until after Malcolm had met and had been defeated by the Vandals; then the doors to the fortress had been opened. But Sigurd had not kept his pledge to let the defenders go in peace. Every man in the fortress had been slain.

"Every man?" Culen asked dully.

"Perhaps a few escaped to the hills," said the man. "Yet I have heard that not a man escaped."

Culen bit his lips. He thought of Finlegh, of Scanlan. One after another the faces of the defenders of Nairn passed in review before his memory. Women and children and the old had been in the fortress, too. He couldn't bring himself to ask about them.

"Vandals overrun all the lowlands of Scotia," said the man. "There is safety only in the hills."

"King Malcolm?"

"Of him I do not know. Some say that he was killed in the battle."

"His army?"

"Such as escaped have fled to the Highlands. There I go also."

Culen knew that it was of no use for him to continue north. For a while he stood where he had met the man, irresolute, not knowing what to do. Then he turned and slowly followed after him and his gait was the gait of an old man, faltering and heavy.

IV

EACH day at Loch Achray was like the one before it, for whether it rained or was sunny, whether the cold north winds whistled through the hills or were still, the days to Culen were but intervals of lights between the hours of darkness.

He hardly stirred from the hut of Auloc. When food was brought to him he ate, hardly aware of what it was. At first,

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Auloc's daughter had tried to talk to him, but soon she, like the men who lived nearby, left him strictly alone.

There were many men in the hills these days, soldiers who had escaped after the battle with the Vandals, farmers who had fled to the higher lands with their families, merchants from the towns and villages who had been driven from their shops. They moved in an endless stream past Auloc's hut near the shore of the loch, each one bringing new tales of disaster and new stories of the horror which was sweeping over Scotia.

Culen heard what they had to say, but their words stirred nothing in him. His feelings seemed to have been deadened on that day when he had turned toward these hills. He was living, yet he was dead and he wondered sometimes to what purpose he still drew breath or why he should eat food which would keep another alive.

Then in the quiet dusk of a summer's evening Auloc's daughter appeared suddenly before him. She stood very straight with her shoulders thrown back and there was a proud tilt to her head. A light which Culen had never before noticed sparkled in her eyes and her face was flushed as though from some excitement.

"Heard ye of the battle?" she demanded, "the battle at Bochastle?"

Culen scowled, shook his head.

"An army of the Vandals was met there by men from the highlands. The Vandals were trying to enter the hills. They were defeated, turned back and many of them were slain, though our force was less than half their number."

The tone of the girl's voice stirred Culen. He moved uneasily on his bench. The girl went on talking, giving him details of the fight.

"It could hardly be called a battle," Culen muttered when she had finished.

The girl stepped back as though he had slapped her. A sudden anger flashed in her eyes. "Who are ye to call it only a battle?" she demanded sharply. "All that ye do is sit here and stare into the waters of the loch while men not half your size guard the mountain passes against the Vandals? Is there no blood in your body? Is your heart made of stone?"

"Nay," said Culen, "but—"

"I have heard," interrupted the girl, "that ye call yourself a thane, that ye are by right of birth a *maormor,* a chieftain of your clan. Yet all ye do is sit here while the Vandals sweep over Scotia, while your king is in exile, while Sigurd and Sweyn and the traitor Dundolf plan to cut this country up between them."

Culen started. "Ye mentioned Dundolf?"

"Aye, a trusted friend of the king's, the foremost archer in Scotia, yet still a man who led half of Malcolm's army astray so that the Vandals could more easily overcome them."

"An archer, ye say?" asked Culen, getting to his feet. "A dark-bearded man, tall and broad of shoulder."

The girl nodded, frowning.

FOR a moment Culen looked at her without seeing her at all. His father had been slain by an archer who had escaped unseen and who must have winged the shaft from a safe distance. Grim, mounted on a plunging steed had been slain by an archer. The feathered shafts in each instance had been much the same, had perhaps been sped from the same bow.

And in that group through which he and Grim had charged in their escape from the castle had been another familiar face beside Sigurd's. The face of Dundolf whom this girl had called the finest archer in Scotia. The face of Dundolf the traitor, Dundolf the murderer.

A short, half-strangled cry came from Culen's throat. Over on the shore of Loch Achray stood a huge boulder. Several days before, Culen had heard Auloc speaking of it, telling an old legend which he said he had had from the fairy-folk.

According to the legend, when the boulder fell into Loch Achray the men of the Highlands would arise and throw off their oppressors. Auloc had been telling the story hopefully to a group of men passing into the hills. They had all tried to move the

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boulder, but their combined weight and strength had not stirred it.

Culen moved forward, passed the girl, walked on to the boulder. He leaned his shoulder against it, dug his feet into the ground. For a moment the boulder didn't move, then as though it were of no weight at all it tilted slowly forward and splashed into the loch.

"You did it—alone," whispered the girl, and there was awe in her voice.

Culen straightened, looked around at her. He recalled, suddenly, that her name was Maora; he saw that she was beautiful and wondered that he hadn't noticed that before.

"You did it alone," said the girl again.

Culen shook his head. "Nay, not alone, for Odin helped me. Until today I wondered why I was still alive, but now I know. Where say ye that this battle was fought?"

"At Bochastle."

"And how would I get there?"

The girl told him and Culen nodded. "I have need of a sword, Maora," he said quietly.

Maora turned away and then a moment later was back at his side with a sword. She was a little breathless as she fastened it to his belt.

Culen's hand dropped to the hilt of the sword and the feel of it was like wine to his blood. He looked down at the girl, smiled, murmured a goodbye and then was off on the course she had named.

THE Highlanders in the camp near Bochastle were still exulting over their victory the next morning; and Foss, their leader, a broad-shouldered giant with flaming red hair and beard, was talking of what they would do to the Vandals the next time they passed.

Suddenly Ross was interrupted by a stinging voice: "Why do ye wait for them? Are ye cowards that ye hide in the hills while an enemy despoils the Lowlands of Scotia?"

An abrupt silence fell over the men for an instant, then a chorus of angry replies filled the air. Ross had swung around. "Who calls us cowards?" he shouted. "Let him step forth!"

Culen elbowed his way through the crowd. His face was not so sun-tanned as it had been two months before but it looked older, more matured. It was thin, tight-skinned, and a sharpness had come into his glance. As tall and heavy as he was, he was dwarfed by Ross' great body.

"I said those words," Culen said calmly. "I ask ye again? Are ye cowards that ye hide in the hills while the Vandals despoil the lowlands?"

A sudden anger flamed in Ross' face and a roar burst from his throat. He stepped forward, seized Culen in his arms, and swung him into the air. Those nearby scattered out of the way, thinking the stranger would be hurled among them. But Culen caught Ross' head under the chin and around the throat. He could feel the straining of the giant's muscles as he tried to push free. Ross lowered him to the ground, gasping, and Culen laughed and let the man go.

Ross almost lost his balance and that and Culen's taunting laugh brought another shout of rage from him. He charged forward, and then the men there saw the body of their leader caught and flung into the air, far over Culen's head.

Ross' fall was heavy, but he did not stay down. A little unsteadily he rose to his feet; once again he lunged forward and again Culen caught him and lifted him into the air. This time, however, instead of hurling Ross' body over his head, Culen lowered it to the ground beside him and shoved the man away.

"Will ye hear what I have to say?" he demanded. "Or must I break your thick head?"

ROSS mopped a hand over his face. He stared at Culen as though he still couldn't believe what had happened, and one of his hands crept down to the knife in his belt. Culen took a step toward him, frowned, looked around at the others.

"I will say what I have come to say," he announced bluntly. "After that, as many

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as will can try their luck with me at wrestling or with knife or sword or ax.

"Listen, men of Scotia! Ye must choose now whether ye would be slave to the Vandals or free men as ye have always been, whether your children shall live in bondage or as ye have lived, servant only to themselves.

"I offer ye the chance to die for Scotia, that Scotia may live. I offer ye an honorable death rather than a lifetime of slavery. And I ask again, are ye cowards that ye would hide in the hills like the animals ye hunt?"

Culen paused, stared from side to side. Ross had taken his hand from his knife, was leaning forward, breathing heavily. The others were intent, and from somewhere a man asked, "What would ye have us do? How could so few of us drive the Vandals from Scotia?"

"Few?" Culen challenged. "Are there not ten thousand men in the hills who could bear arms?"

"But more Vandals have come. Twenty thousand—some say even thirty thousand."

Culen laughed. "What matter if there be fifty thousand? They have broken our army and are no longer watchful. They rove the Lawlands not together but in many groups. If ye stay here in the hills they will gradually choke the life from ye. Some day they will march this way in a company so strong that ye cannot turn them back. We have but one chance, to strike now while they are not prepared."

There was more talk, much more talk, but after that first moment Culen knew that he had won these men. Ross and a few others conferred in whispers, and then Ross came over to him and thrust out a hand. He said, "We are with ye, Culen. Where do we meet and when?"

There was much more that Culen had to do. He was not now ready to name a meeting time, yet he must tell them something; he must have some sign to assemble those who would follow him. Through the trees he could see the majestic crown of Ben-ormand. That mountain, he knew, could be seen from almost any part of these eastern highlands. He lifted his arms and pointed to it.

"Watch on Ben-ormand, every night. Watch for the fire—for a cross of fire, and when ye see that sign, come to Loch Achray."

. . . That was the beginning. Culen traveled from Bochastle to a camp in the Strath-ire, to Braidalbane and into the Argyle. He swung back through the hills to other small towns, camps, villages. In some places he had no trouble at all; men needed only a word to be aroused. He discovered that men had heard of him, were only awaiting his orders.

But there were times when he had trouble. A man named Lulach tested his ability with the sword, and another named Osbert set four men on him at a camp called Dalgenross. He took care of Lulach without difficulty and of his fight at Dalgenross men were to talk for many a year.

But of those troubles Culen thought but little. In the very air of the Highlands he could now sense a difference. It breathed of life, of an undercurrent of excitement.

Others must have sensed that, too. Small groups of armed men began to straggle into the growing camp on the shores of Loch Achray. They would stare at the boulder which Culen had pushed into the loch and then add to that story others that they had heard of him, legends of his prowess. And each night, thousands of eyes watched Ben-ormand for the sign of the firey cross.

Then one evening just after dusk, while Auloc was telling a group of men how Culen had come to the hills, Maora burst into the hut. Her face was pale from excitement and she could hardly speak.

"The cross," she said huskily. "On Ben-ormand. Look! You can see it from the loch shore. It is afire!"

Auloc and the others hurried out. Hundreds of men had already gathered on the shore and all of them were staring across its waters toward the heavy black shadow which was Ben-ormand. Atop the mountain was a blaze of fire. The sign! A burning cross! And even while those men

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stared at it, Maora thought that she could hear the sound of many marching feet. She stretched her arms toward the cross and the look in her face was almost reverent.

V

NO STRANGER army had ever been assembled, for it included in its number men of all ages and of all kinds. Shopkeepers and farmers who had fled from the Lowlands, soldiers of King Malcolm's once proud army, tall rugged Highlanders. Many were unarmored, some had no swords or axes or spears but carried clubs. Many were boys and a few were too old to walk very far.

And it was a silent army. There was little shouting. Its men talked to each other in quiet, subdued tones. Grim of expression, they looked toward the east and the passes that led down to the lowlands. Some sharpened their weapons. They knew that many of them would never come back to the hills again, but there was no talk of turning back.

Culen reached Loch Achray in the early morning. It seemed to Maora that he was thinner than when he had gone away, and taller, too, and more sure of himself. He had only a nod for the girl, only a word for Auloc, and then he sought out Ross and Lulock and Maobride and Osbert and other leaders of the men still streaming into the camp.

His orders were few. "We leave at once and by dusk drop down through the mountain passes to the Lowlands. Each chieftain is responsible for his men. According to those who have come lately into the hills, Sigurd and his main army are camped at Mortlock. We go that way.

"I need not tell you what to do. Ye are fighting not for King Malcolm or for me. Ye are fighting for Scotia, for your homes and your children, for your right to live as free men rather than as slaves."

Though he had hardly been aware of it, Culen's voice had grown stronger and stronger until those last words of his carried for a great distance. And as he stopped speaking a shout went up from those who had heard him and swords and spears were brandished in the air.

A faint smile touched Culen's lips. He lifted his hands and when there was silence he shouted, "I have this one order to add. Let no man turn back until the Vandals are driven into the sea."

They marched then, that strange army of old men and young boys, of stalwart Highlanders and armored soldiers, of farmers and shopkeepers. Through the hill country to the mountain passes and through the passes to the plains below.

A semblance of order settled over the ranks. Now and then the leaders conferred, discussing what to do in this event or that, shrewdly eyeing their men and reckoning their possibilities in battle.

At Mortloch, Sigurd the Vandal awaited word from Sweyn. He had not yet dared declare himself king of this country he had conquered, for many of the men with him had been supplied by Sweyn, and it was Sweyn who had always sworn to take Scotia—Sweyn, the most powerful king in the Northland.

A messenger, riding swiftly into the camp, pulled up at Sigurd's tent. There was a shocked and almost frightened look on the messenger's face. "They come!" he cried. "Thousands of them! The plains are black with their number."

"Who comes?" Sigurd demanded. "Ye mean that Sweyn—"

The messenger pointed to the west. "An army from the hill country. They—"

Sigurd laughed, shook his head. "There is no army in the hill country. Only half-civilized tribes and those who have fled. What mean ye that an army comes from the west?"

The messenger tried to explain but Sigurd, growing impatient, turned and walked to the western edge of the camp. He saw there the slanting rays of the morning sun glistening on armor and spearpoint far away. He rubbed his eyes, stared again, but it was no vision. He had thought it impossible that an army could again be

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raised to oppose him, yet from somewhere an army had come. He began to shout orders.

BEFORE the men from the highland had come up to Sigurd's camp the Vandals' battleline had been formed. When Culen saw it, saw how well armed were the Northmen and how deep their line, his shoulders sagged a little.

The men he led could have no chance against such odds. Many of those who followed him were not even warriors, knew nothing of battle. Only a few had shields, only a few wore armor. Yet even before he could give any order a great shout went up from the men behind him, a shout that was repeated again and again.

"For Scotia," the men were shouting. "For Scotia! For Scotia!"

And they were racing forward as though untired by their long march, as though completely unmindful of the strength of that armored line of Northmen. A cloud of arrows loosed by the Vandal archers darkened the sky, fell like rain on the charging throng. Here and there men sprawled to the ground, some to get up and stagger on, still shouting. Others to lie there silent.

Culen was racing forward with the rest and his voice had joined theirs in the battle-cry. Suddenly that line of Northmen was just ahead and the din of clashing swords filled the air. Culen's blade slashed from side to side in deep, cutting strokes.

He moved ever forward and to his left a pale-faced shopkeeper who had probably never before held a weapon in his hand, and to his right, a tall, gaunt Highlander, kept pace with him. They hewed their way through that line of men and others followed after them, broke through and attacked the Vandals from the rear.

Over to the extreme left and far to the right, the mounted men who had come with them were turning the Vandals' flank and everywhere, it seemed, the Vandals were giving ground. The taste of victory was in Culen's mouth, in the sound of his voice.

Then charging through the Vandals' tents came a new line of Northmen, a second line, formed and kept out of sight until then. They swept down on the Highland army and hurled it back by the weight of their numbers. Here and there a man turned to flee, but most places the Highlanders gave ground but slowly.

Culen lost all sense of time after that. He raged up and down the line of battle, seeking always the place where the fighting was the thickest, where there seemed some danger that the Highlanders might give way. His voice was never stilled, his arm never weary.

That second Vandal line was broken and then a third, and then the Highlanders were raging through the Vandal camp. Suddenly, just ahead of him, Culen caught sight of Sigurd and the dark-bearded Dundolf. He slashed his way toward them, shouting out their names.

Dundolf turned around toward him, swung up a sword to ward off Culen's blow, but the blade Culen held smashed that sword out of the way and cut deep into Dundolf skull. As the traitor went down, Sigurd fled.

Culen rested the point of his sword on the bloody ground and let his weight sag wearily against the hilt. For the first time since he had tasted the magic draught of Odin, he felt drained and exhausted. The fiery strength seemed to have left him and he wondered how long he could go on with the fight.

It was all over then, though Culen didn't know it. Throughout the rest of the day and for the next week, bands of the Highlanders and of the king's soldiers were to pursue the fleeing Vandals on across the plains. And here and there throughout the Lowlands, other groups were to be captured and slain. Not many were to escape.

But now Culen stood staring down at Dundolf. He turned the man over with his foot, noted the arrow sling at his shoulder, and stooping over drew out one of the feathered shafts. It was a duplicate of the shafts which had killed his father and Grim. Culen broke it and dropped it to the ground. Dundolf had slain his father think-

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ing that with the Dougal out of the way

"They have fled, Culen," said a voice at Sigurd's capture of Nairn would be easier. his shoulder. "Scotia is again free."

Culen looked around. It was Auloc who was speaking. There was a bloody gash across his head but otherwise he seemed unhurt.

"I have it from the fairy-folk," Auloc continued, "that never again will the Vandals take Scotia. They told me that if we turned them back this time we would be forever free."

The old man was jubilant.

He was speaking the truth, though Culen couldn't know it. That battle at Mortloch was the decisive battle in the struggle between the people of Scotia and the Northmen. For another century the Northmen were to raid the coastline, yet never in such numbers and never with the thought of conquest.

A great shout went up from one side of the camp. Culen looked that way. "It is King Malcolm," said Auloc. "Did ye not know that he was with us?"

The old man looked at him with bright and eager eyes. "He's sure to reward you well, Culen," he said. "You will be rich and powerful. No doubt King Malcolm will make you one of his trusted advisers. Oh, yes."

Culen shrugged. He had no interest just then in King Malcolm.

THE king was holding court in his royal palace at Dunfermline and through cheering throngs Culen made his way to the palace gate. The king had sent for him and he had come, but he had expected no such reception as this. He didn't like it. It made him feel uneasy. He wanted now only the peace and freedom of his life in Torland. Nothing more.

The guards at the palace gate drew back as Culen approached. They made no attempt, this time, to block his way, nor did any man grasp his arm as he stepped into the great hall where the king and his court awaited.

Culen moved steadily through that hall until he faced the king. And the king stood up, smiling this time.

"Ye sent for me, Sire?" Culen asked.

His face was white and strained.

The king's smile broadened. "Who are ye?"

Men laughed at that, but Culen did not. He said clearly, "I am the Dougal, Thane of Torland."

At that moment, he looked a thane indeed. His eyes were firm, his manner was assured.

"But there is no Torland," said the king.

Culen looked boldly at the king and it seemed to him that the king was laughing silently. Then after a moment the king spoke again.

"Ye have served me well, Culen. What reward would ye have?"

No simpler question could have been put to Culen. "Ye have called the people of Torland by the name Vandal," he said quietly. "Ye have said that they were Northmen, that they did not belong in Scotia. Yet for generations they have lived here. What reward would I ask? Only this. That my people be recognized as a part of this kingdom, not made slaves to some other thane."

The king's eyes pierced him.

"And for yourself?"

"Nothing."

Malcolm came down from the throne seat. "Several days ago," he told Culen, "I had messages from the south. Canute, the Dane, who calls himself king of England is marching north with a great army. I have asked my friends what man should lead my army against them and no one has given me any name but yours. Culen, your people shall have their freedom, yet another must be thane for I need you here."

Culen shook his head. "Nay, Sire. I have no wish—"

The king interrupted with a sudden and decisive sharpness:

"But I command it."

"There are other leaders—"

"None like ye. None who can build an army of terrified men. None in whom the love of Scotia is any stronger, none whose

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hatred of oppression is greater. I command it, Culen."

For a long moment Culen made no answer. Everything within him cried out against this task. He had thought to find peace and happiness in Torland with his own people. He had thought to seek out Maora, Auloc's daughter, and ask her to share his life.

Yet even as he remembered those things he knew that for him there could be no peace and he recalled that warning voice which had come to him when he had lifted Odin's cup to his lips. It was his fate to cherish freedom, yet never to know it, to search for peace yet find it not. He knew that he would do as the king asked.

"Tell those who wait outside that it is settled," said King Malcolm to a man near him. "Tell them that Culen the Dougal from Torland will lead our armies."

The man carried the message outside and a great cheering shout answered his announcement. Culen straightened, nodded to the king. This was his life and he could not fight against it.

His chin lifted, and into his blue eyes came a glow like holy fire. His clenched fist rose.

He said, "Aye, Sire. I will lead them."

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Yaqui Gold

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

The haphazard barricade was little protection against the Yaqui arrows and bullets

THOSE enterprising though ruthless promoters, Dennis and Ledgate, have hired Don Wayland to fly over savage Yaqui land in search of the lost Tiopa Mine. But Wayland and his photographer, Herb Keller, are forced down by engine trouble, and a band of Yaquis attacks them; it is only after Keller has been badly mauled by the Indians that Wayland manages to drive them off.

After days of terrible suffering Wayland and Keller find their way to the camp of Gilbert Frayne. This mild, middle-aged man is a college professor who has studied the mystery of the Tiopa Mine for years; now, with an expedition of friendly Yaquis led by the loyal Chayoga, he is attempting to discover the mine before Dennis and Ledgate can. Frayne wants Don Wayland for an ally, but the flyer is not won away from his employers until the dramatic arrival of Frayne's daughter at the camp.

BACK in the town of Guaymas, Don Wayland fell in love with this girl without knowing who she was. There she called herself Lorela Romero and sang in a night club. Having barely escaped from the hirelings of Ledgate and Dennis, she offers Wayland further proof that his employers are crooked and ruthless; and he agrees to join the Frayne expedition. His job will be to lead the way to the Lake of the Gods, which he located from his plane; but the not-so-distant Yaqui war drums warn the party of danger ahead.

Santana Chayoga, Frayne's Yaqui lieutenant, is suspicious of Don Wayland. But right now Chayoga's difficult task is to seek out

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his tribe in the hills and persuade them to receive Gilbert Frayne as a friend. Arriving at the tribe's village, he discovers that his uncle, Yacupaz the chief, is swiftly losing his power over his people. For Jalana, the old woman witch doctor, is winning the allegiance of the warriors with her mutterings of ancient magic; and she decrees that the white strangers must die.

The night the tribe votes on how they will receive the Frayne expedition, Chayoga makes his point eloquently; and the Yaqui elders agree to peace. But later Chayoga hears a murmur of talk at Jalana's cave; he creeps there—to find that she is urging the group of younger warriors to attack the Frayne camp. And Chayoga has no chance to warn his tribal chief or his white master; Jalana discovers him and the war-drunk Yaquis quickly make him a prisoner. . . .

CHAPTER X

FLAMING ARROW

LONG before the end of the day that was to bring Frayne's party to the camp site Wayland had selected, it was apparent that the goal could not be reached before sunset. He said to Lorela and her father, "It's my fault. That *barranca,* the one I hadn't counted on—look over there."

He pointed at the high table that had been his goal. In the clear air, it seemed that a pistol shot would reach it, and in fact, the distance was not so great; but the *barranca* he had not counted on intervened. All day long, porters and burros had slid down trails so steep that the fear of thousand-foot drops became commonplace; or else here were climbs that made it doubtful if any luggage could be hauled.

Frayne chuckled and gestured. "We're not lost. Here we are, past Suaqui and actually on the Rio Bavispe. We'd have had to make this climb later, though I can see why Chayoga thought we ought to stay."

"Right. Maybe he did try to harpoon me, but I'll admit there could be a better path. A shortcut, or something." Wayland was closer to the truth than he realized. "Hauling water is going to be tough, and going without is worse, and that's only the half of it. We're in a nasty spot if anyone tries to take us over."

Lorela said, "There isn't a spot within a hundred miles that isn't nasty."

So they made camp. The porters showed no sign of discontent, though no one could tell what was going on behind their flat faces. One of them began beating on a canteen with his finger tips and the heel of his hand, while the others chanted. Presently, one got to his feet and began to stamp and posture in time with the drumming. Then the singers droned a line; they paused for the dancer to shout one, gesturing as he made his response.

For some moments, Wayland and Frayne watched the performance. It was not lighthearted clowning; it was far too solemn and methodical.

"What do you make of it, Dad?" Lorela asked finally.

Frayne knocked the ashes from his pipe. "Can't say. What's your guess, Don?"

"Uh . . . looks like a folk dance." He glanced at Lorela. "You're a dancer; this ought to interest you."

With a quick movement she drew her shawl a little closer. "Please don't try to spare me anything. They're just going native, or haven't you two guessed that?"

"Native?" Wayland looked blank and pretended to misunderstand. "What do you mean, darling?"

"They're getting near the ancestral headquarters. Remembering things. Old customs."

Keller grimaced, for his back itched and tingled from the healing herbs Tula had cooked up for poultices. There was no doubt that he was recovering more rapidly than could have been expected. He grumbled, "Listen, I been at the receiving end of them customs, it positively ain't comical!"

The next day's march was no better, nor any worse. There was a long detour, then a doubling back; and the sun was low when the caravan filed into the plateau Wayland had expected to reach on the previous day. Game had become perceptibly scarcer, for it had been driven to cover by the persistence of Yaqui hunters.

Keller pointed at the *zopilotes* that circled against the ruddy sky. "Buzzards

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mark the spot. I bet the place we're heading for is right on the other side of that big baldheaded granite hump."

ZOPILOTES wait for village refuse and offal as well as for carrion, and Keller's guess was clinched by the one peak which towered well over the others. It had a snowcap, glittering in the setting sun. The village of Yacupaz was not far off, but it was the rumble of drums, shortly before dusk, that made Wayland say to Frayne: "What are your ideas on making this camp a bit more fool-proof?"

Frayne made a quizzical grimace. "You're the most suspicious chap I've met in a long time. Well . . . I don't believe you. I've been worried about Chayoga."

"At long last, huh?"

"That's not what I mean. I've been wondering if Chayoga's loyalty to me may not end by getting him into serious trouble with his wild relatives. After all, he's been away from them for a dozen years. That he slipped out of our camp makes me think that he may have had his own doubts, so he decided to spy things out a little."

"Nuh-uh!" Wayland was emphatic. "Spying on his old friends, sure, that would be cagey. But slipping out on *us!* You've got the argument hindpart foremost."

Frayne knocked the ashes from his straight grain pipe and carefully trampled out the embers. The rains had not yet started, and he did not want any fires to complicate matters.

"Don, I'm afraid your logic is just a shade too sound for argument, but I'll risk it. I'd say it was a matter of pride. Chayoga would not want to admit any doubts, so he slipped out. If all is well, he has saved his face. If things are dubious or dangerous, then it's time enough to tell us we'd better run while we can."

Lorela had listened in on most of the argument that centered about Chayoga. "My guess is that he just didn't want to worry us with the explanations we'd insist on. Or he may just be working by instinct, doing things he scarcely could explain."

"Demanding explanations," Frayne said, "is what makes the so-called civilized people so outrageous to primitive folks."

Wayland snorted. "I noticed that when I asked how-come about Chayoga's chipped knife. But we need a barricade."

"First, we'd better eat," Frayne interrupted. "Airan's beating the kettle lid."

Keller was saying to Lorela, "Gorgeous, I'm through being hauled around like an invalid. Tomorrow, I'm hoofing it, and with a bit more of Tula's doctoring, I'll be pretty durable except for carrying a pack."

"So you don't like luxury?"

"It gives me the creeps, them jackasses doing tap-dances on the edge of a six-thousand-foot drop."

"Do be accurate, Herb," she said. "It's seldom over four thousand to the bottom, and you thought nothing at all of going up in a plane."

"Nuts! A plane gets it done and over with, but you expect it every minute, all day long, only it never happens with these vest-pocket donkeys."

Wayland was not fooled by the banter of his companions. It was a good act, but still, it was an act. The fire failed to give its usual illusion of making a warm island of safety. Drums again muttered, and they were louder than ever. The *tamenes* stopped chattering and sat up.

"Wish I could read drum-talk. It's different, this time."

Frayne's smile was bleak. "Every anthropologist I've ever met has wished the same. It's something that is not learned in classrooms."

Lorela said, "They're listening. Look at them hunch forward."

Frayne, who had taken Chayoga's word for the fidelity of the men he had picked, shrugged and got his detective thriller. He was over halfway through the omnibus. Keller spread out his blanket and stretched out on his stomach, for his back would need a rest for some time to come.

Wayland was making a circuit of the mesa, sizing up the trees that found root in the rocky soil. They were not too large

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to cut down for barricades, and the muttering drums made him think of defense. Even if as a last resort there had to be flight down the foaming stream that had brought him and Keller to safety, a barricade would give him a chance to cover the retreat of Lorela and her father.

Lorela's cry made him whirl. "Don, look!"

He ran toward the fire. She was pointing at the Yaquis. Keller was scrambling to his feet, and Frayne had laid down his book, after carefully turning the corner of the page.

THE Yaquis were rising and peeling off their shirts. They formed in two ranks, facing each other. Bodies stiffly erect, feet moving in mechanical routine, they pranced toward each other, gesturing; then they retreated. Their motions were halting, hesitant, as of a poorly drilled chorus. One of the dancers screamed like an eagle.

"Take it easy!" Wayland said. "If you look scared, we're sunk."

"Is it a war dance?"

Frayne said, "It looks—I've heard of that step—like the stag dance. But Lord knows!"

"I'm breaking it up." Wayland straightened, let his shoulders relax, then sauntered over to the dancers. He said to the cook, who was at the end of one line, "Airan, what's this business?"

Airan heard, but he pretended not to. One of the porters quit dancing for a few beats, then got in step again. Wayland reached for the biggest pot with a handle. He cracked down on Airan's head.

"Answer when you're spoken to! What's the idea?"

The clang of metal startled the prancing porters, and they forgot their steps. Airan reeled back, tripped, and fell. The suddenness rather than the force of the blow had dazed him. Wayland said to the astonished group, "No time for games. We're going to barricade the camp. When that's done, go ahead and play."

These were tame Yaquis. Also, the several who had been furnished with weapons had left their arms with the shirts they had taken off. But for a moment, Wayland was not sure that his pistol would get him very far. They stood there, faces blank, little eyes gleaming. He knew that if one man raised a hand, he would have to kill that man.

But Wayland did not put his hand on his gun. He folded his arms and stood there. Beyond the group, he saw Tula. She had come out of her shelter, eyes wide, her mouth gaping.

Then the man nearest Wayland said, "*Señor,* we wish to do the stag dance. To practice. We have forgotten, and soon we will meet our people and they will laugh."

"That's fine. But first cut down enough saplings for a barricade. Just in case your relatives try to take your guns away from you. They like guns, and they may not like you."

They eyed each other, then they turned to obey the order. When the men were on the way, Wayland tried to follow; but he could not, for his knees were ready to buckle, and his stomach was playing the devil. So he stood there, for a minute, while the *tamenes* got axes.

Later, he said to Frayne, "I still don't know whether they were just practicing, or whether they had notions of cooking up a bit of hell. I guess I never will know whether I bluffed them down, or whether I went off half-cocked. But talk about feeling sea-sick—I need a drink!"

It was nearly midnight when the Yaquis finished arranging saplings and boulders in a barricade that would repel a small attack, or give all but the rear guard a chance to go down the steep trail and to the river, where a raft had been made of dead timber and cords.

Wayland said, "Now you can dance, or you can dive for your blankets. If you want to sleep, I'll watch until sunrise."

They were tame enough now, and they wanted rest, but there was no telling which way they would turn if the wild kinsmen set the example by attacking. Whether armed or not, these porters would finally

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do as they wanted to do. So Wayland gambled boldly.

He said, "Your guns are under that canvas. I put them away so the dew wouldn't rust them. Take them and sleep with them."

Those who had weapons went and got them. Airan spent a moment rubbing his chin and staring at Wayland. He went away, frowning and shaking his head as if puzzled.

That night, it was easy to stay awake. At four, Frayne joined Wayland. The Yaqui does not like to fight at night; dawn and shortly thereafter, was the danger period, but this was no time to take things for granted. Not after the distant drumming and dancing.

Wayland felt and smelled and tasted the first signs of dawn before he could see any thinning of the darkness. Small, sleepy twitterings came from the river, far below; the freshness of a revived world flavored the breeze that nipped through his shirt.

The cry of a bird startled him. Its awakening had been too sudden. Something was rousing small animals which had not yet begun to stir. The sounds came from the direction of the cleft in the cliff that swooped up from the broad mesa to the next terrace. This was the logical approach for attackers.

Wayland nudged Frayne. "Something's heading this way."

They listened for several minutes. They began to doubt. And then a rock clattered down the steep descent. A man yelled, and there was no more attempt at stealth. Half a dozen rifles crackled, and blazing arrows hissed across the mesa.

Most of the arrows, skimming waist high, stuck in the barricade. Some hit the brush shelters, while others nailed the tarpaulins and the packs. Frayne and Wayland fired into the gloom, and then Keller joined them. The porters turned out, yelling. But for the barricade, the light of the blazing arrows would have given the attackers a great advantage.

"They're checked," Wayland said. "The surprise was on them, not us. But they're not quitting. They'll be back. This looks like payday!"

CHAPTER XI

WAY OF A WITCH

JALANA was enjoying her triumph, relishing the success of the first move made against Yacupaz; and while her drunken allies went to surprise Frayne's camp, the witch planned her next move.

She cackled as she saw the fury in Chayoga's eyes. To be taken into camp by a woman was the ultimate in humiliation, and rage left him little room for a very logical fear. Jalana could murder him and hide his body in the further recesses of her tunnel, into which no Yaqui would venture without her invitation.

Chayoga was firmly tied; he had tested his bonds, and vigorously enough to make her mock his futile efforts. The rawhide thongs cut into his ankles and wrists, and stopped the circulation. His limbs were numb, so numb that even if the witch's vigilance finally relaxed, he could not get near enough to the stack of pots by the door to kick one to the rocky floor of the mesa.

"Long ago, the gods told me of your treason," Jalana went on, as she squatted some six feet away from her captive. "No one can keep his secret thoughts hidden from me. It was written on your face." She cackled, got up, and hobbled toward the shadows of the cavern. "Now I shall write on your face, and all can read."

She came back with an old-fashioned metal ramrod and thrust it into the coals that kept her kettle simmering. Fire was the favorite torment to inflict on an enemy, and Jalana's malice demanded as much for Chayoga as for any captive Spaniard. She sat there, bald head cocked to one side; she looked like a vulture, with her scrawny neck and its outstanding veins. Her crooked nose almost reached her sharp chin, and her cheeks were sunken and leathery.

"I'll brand you, Chayoga, and wherever you go, men will know that I did it—

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that a woman mocked you. That the gods hated you, or they would not have let this happen to you."

Even as a man was unsuited for tilling corn, so was a woman unsuited for war and hunting; and for a fighting man to fall into a woman's hands was the final disgrace. He could no more carry such a brand of infamy and rule a tribe than Yacupaz could rule after having been defied by his warriors. In either case, the man was robbed of the peculiar sanctity that gave a chief his right to rule.

"I won't kill you," Jalana went on, as she twisted about to inspect the iron, "for men are all too few and our tribe needs those it has. Also, you have brought the Golden Goddess. Old prophecies said that she would come with strangers, and this is another reason for sparing you."

She drew the ramrod from the fire, and came near. The bright red metal radiated heat. Chayoga tensed himself so that he would not flinch. Deliberately, she drew the point along his cheek. His teeth set, and sweat cropped out all over his body; and the smell of scorching skin filled the cave. She grinned, and brought the iron near his eyes. He wondered if he could keep from blinking as the dull red rod came closer.

If his mouth had been free, he could have mocked her for being so stingy with the fuel; but now all he could do was to harden himself against flinching. She wanted him to squirm, to wriggle, to shrink from repeated small brandings until he lost all control of himself; until he was a twitching madman, never again fit to sit in council with the elders. But however futile resistance was, he would hold out as long as he could.

She drew the iron back. It was too thin to hold its full heat, and while it would make a severe burn, its terrifying glow had dimmed. This was part of the long-drawn-out torment, making the victim vainly set himself against it and then relax. Jalana hobbled to the fire, and fed it with chunks of bark. These blazed up, and she ignored her prisoner.

CHAYOGA'S burned cheek began to hurt, for the anaesthesia of numbed nerve ends had worn off. Next she might run a stripe along his leg, bit by bit criss-crossing his body with burns. He remembered how he and other village brats years ago had tortured two Mexican officers. They had howled and screamed long before the irons were applied, whereas a Yaqui could endure a while.

As long as he could keep himself under control, he had a chance. When Jalana's back was turned, he relaxed and wriggled like a measuring worm, getting a few inches closer to the fire. Now that the shock of having been clubbed was leaving him, he realized that Jalana had one handicap which she did not suspect. She remembered how Spanish Mexicans became crazed with torment, how they literally quivered and twitched themselves to death, perishing as much from terror as from their burns. It was very unlikely that she had ever tested her skill on a fellow Yaqui, and this was Chayoga's hope.

Jalana turned back toward her captive, and she did not seem to realize that the distance had become an inch or two shorter. Once more he felt the hot breath, and then the numbing touch of red-hot iron; once more, the smell of burning skin filled his nostrils, but this time, she branded his chest.

She was not working at random; rather, methodically tiring her captive, making him wear himself to exhaustion from wriggling over the flinty floor of the cave. Chayoga flinched from the second scorching, and his shirt became soaked with blood and sweat.

The old woman cackled hoarsely, like a *zopilote* squawking over fresh carrion. "So, you're wiggling already, eh? Soft from living with the *Nakhai!* But you'll see the Golden Goddess come to lead us against the oppressors. You'll live, you'll live."

A farewell thrust, lightly made along his ribs; and the witch turned once more to her fire. She seemed to have been fooled by Chayoga's apparent surrender, but he could not be sure. Now that he had seen her

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face to face, he almost believed that she told the truth when she claimed to have seen Spanish soldiers wearing metal casques and cuirasses during her childhood. When not killed by violence or pestilence, his people often lived more than a century; his own great-grandmother had survived all her children, and both Chayoga's parents.

Outside, a dog howled, and an owl hooted; somewhere a panther screamed, but thus far, there was no crackle of musketry. Chayoga had little idea of the time that had elapsed since the handful of drunken tribesmen had left camp to massacre Frayne, but until he heard the first sounds of attack, he would not surrender. And his own future was at stake; he had to get away before anyone saw that a woman had tricked and humiliated him.

Sweat had soaked the rawhide thongs, and they had loosened enough to let his circulation resume; his writhing had stretched them further. Jalana muttered, took her reheated brand from the fire, and came toward him; then, after spitting on him, and on the iron, she decided that the metal was not quite hot enough.

She turned back to put it into the coals. He drew his knees up to his chin and then let go, mule-kicking.

His soles landed squarely, and lifted her off her feet.

The witch tried to twist aside, but she could not change her direction. The branding iron skated across the floor, but Jalana landed near the fire, and in her threshing she overturned the cauldron. There was a shower of ashes, and a gust of steam; over the hissing and sputtering and the stench, he heard the old woman's groaning. He had intended to kick her headlong against the pot, but apparently he had done as well, after all, for she lay there in a twitching heap. The crash against the rocks had laid her out. Her buckskin skirt was smoking from embers that had scattered.

CHAYOGA burned his wrists in his efforts to char the rawhide that bound him; and now that he had no fury to strengthen him, he suffered far more than he had from the witch's torturing.

He could not tell the stench of rawhide from the smell of his scorching skin. He wondered if he was only wounding his wrists, and not releasing himself. He was sick and shaking when he broke the charred rawhide, but he lost no time in freeing his ankles.

Jalana was groggy, but trying to get on her feet. He could have killed the witch, but the tribal instinct was too strong, and success had weakened his wrath. Since in her own way, every woman is as useful to the tribe as every man, it would be wrong to finish Jalana. So Chayoga merely kicked her and went on to the entrance of the cave.

Before he was halfway to Yacupaz' shelter, a child began wailing, and he had to stop until its mother hushed it and herself went back to sleep. This did not take long, as Yaqui children quickly learn that crying is dangerous when an enemy is near.

But despite Frayne's peril, Chayoga had to wait, for as things stood, there was no telling how the tribe would act; Jalana's defiance must have had far reaching effects.

Fortunately, the chief slept lightly. In hurried whispers, Chayoga told him what had happened. Yacupaz said, "I ought to use a *machete* on her. You should have killed her yourself!"

"No, uncle! We have to hurry. If we can stop those drunken fools, then your authority is secure again. Neither of us will have lost face!"

"That is right. Let us go then."

Not a dog snarled as they slipped silently across the shelf, and once out of the shadow of the overhang of the cliff, the two had moonlight to guide them. Yacupaz, for all his middle age, stretched his long legs in the easy run of the Yaqui mountaineer, a pace he could keep up for hours.

Chayoga presently panted, "Slowly, uncle! My legs are stiff."

He made no reference to the burns. Those were too shameful to discuss. Yacupaz had tactfully assumed that the handful of drunken tribesmen had captured Chayoga.

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Then they heard firing. Chayoga groaned. "Don't stop, uncle! Not for me! Find a shortcut! Before it's too late."

Yacupaz said, "We've just come to the one I was going to use. But your friends are firing back. Hear the strange guns! But your friends are fools, moving forward."

The chief knew the trail that led down the face of the *barranca.* A sharp wind whipped up the canyon, bringing warm air from the valleys far below, but every now and then icy current swooped down from the high snowfields, chilling the two in spite of their hard pace.

The moon was setting, and Chayoga cursed, for darkness forced him to fumble along that dangerous trail. The sniping duel told him that Frayne's party still held its own, but that could not last.

"Follow as best you can!" Yacupaz was gasping. "It's bad, don't take any chances. It's so dangerous they didn't take it or your friends wouldn't have had a chance."

From then on, they wasted no words and no breath. And soon they came to climb up the opposite steep wall. Already ricochet bullets zinged and whined far above them. The peaks and cliffs reechoed with yells, shots, and the braying of burros. Though cut and slashed by sharp rocks, Chayoga and his uncle fought their way from ledge to ledge.

They reached a cleft that demanded a quarter-mile detour. Chayoga saw his chief stop on the brink of the five hundred-foot-drop, then leap. He made it, and so Chayoga ignored his burned leg. He held his breath, collected himself.

He leaped. Rocks tinkled as they dropped. There was a new voice in the battle; a deep roar, followed by a clattering. Then Chayoga was clawing at the further side, and Yacupaz caught his arm just in time to give him the chance he needed. The old man grinned and gestured.

"That way—it sounds like they have a cannon! But if they rush—"

So the two who had come to break up a battle struck out across the mesa, sprinting.

CHAPTER XII

THE GRIM BARRANCA

THE porters who had guns manned the barricade, and the others picked up packs of supplies to take down to the raft. Escape depended largely on the number of Yaquis in the raiding party, for if there were not too many, Frayne's well armed party had a chance in a running fight.

The nearest rapids were a considerable distance downstream, and the swift current, if it did not tear the raft apart or knock it to pieces against the rocks, would gain enough time for a portage. Wayland explained this to Frayne as soon as he had persuaded the porters to stop wasting ammunition on an invisible enemy.

"You've been through here before," Frayne said. "If the rapids aren't too near, we'll have a chance."

Lorela came running toward the barricade. Wayland yelled, "Get back! Go with the porters! We can hold those fellows long enough."

"Don't worry! I just thought you ought to have someone get that dynamite away before a burning arrow or a bullet touches it off."

Frayne jumped as if stung. "My God! That stack with the burning tarpaulin!"

The darkness had thinned, and swirling mist made the men black silhouettes. The Yaquis began beating drums. Rocks clattered as those in the rear came sliding down the steeply banked debris of the cleft. The first ones to arrive had stopped retreating. They had now taken cover and were firing rifles and arrows at the camp. Now that the sun was almost clear of the Sierra, no more blazing arrows were used; instead, there were long, swift shafts that at short range had the accuracy and force of a rifle bullet.

Frayne jerked the blazing tarpaulin from the heap. Several of the porters opened a sniping duel, now that shifting mist had uncovered previously concealed attackers.

Frayne shouted at one of the *tamenes,* "Grab that other case and get it out of the way!"

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Wayland dashed after him. "Hold it! Why didn't I think of it before? Get some fuse and caps while I open a case. I'll bomb them out! Scare 'em silly!"

Tula came from cover. "Fix it this way, *señor.*" She had a tomato can. "Cut up the stick, put in the pieces of rock, no? Then you throw—*poof!* Like in the revolution, my first husband, he blow up the machine guns, but one day his bomb blow up too quick."

Tula was quite calm about it. She paid no attention to the slugs that snapped past, or zinged from the rocks. Arrows shattered, others thumped into the barricades. A porter was winged. A burro was hit, and the shaft came out nearly a foot on the other side.

As Wayland crimped the cap, Tula said, "Do not cut the fuse too close. That is how Pablo—no, was José that got blow up."

Scrap iron would have been better, but sharp fragments of rock had to do. The attackers were creeping, yard by yard, from one shelter to the next. It was impossible to know whether concentrated rifle fire could stop the final dash. They might go over the first time.

Keller grumbled, "Them drums, all that hooting, you can't tell if you hit a guy or not. Even if he hollers, you can't hear him."

Frayne struck a match. The fuse sputtered, and Wayland straightened up. For a second, he squinted through the shifting bands of mist. Three or four snipers cut loose.

Keller got one, and yelled, "That's fer my back, you lousy heathen!"

Then Wayland heaved the can and dropped quickly to his knees. Tula cried, "Fix one more, quick! I make him, just like for my husband."

The blast drowned the drums and the yelling and the rifles. Flame rose, and the wind carried back the nitrous fumes. The second bomb landed just inside the cleft.

The porters yelled, "How do you like our cannon?"

But the flight from the mesa was interrupted. The tone of the enemy's shouting changed. One deep voice dominated the confusion. A man came from cover, hands raised. "Do not shoot!" he cried.

IT WAS Santana Chayoga. The porters recognized him. Frayne stood up. There was no more firing. Dawn now reached into the shadows. Chayoga's shirt was torn, and his face was cut and caked with dirt.

He said, "*Amo,* I could not get here sooner. Yacupaz came with me to stop those drunken fools!"

That explained the fumbling of the attack, for if sober, the raiders would not have exposed themselves so soon. Wayland followed Chayoga's gesture, and saw a gray-haired man come grandly across the mesa. He was ragged, muddy, bleeding from dozens of scratches and slashes; but he carried his head high, and made a stately gesture.

"Welcome, Señor Frayne," Yacupaz said in the halting Spanish he had learned from some captive. "This attack was against my orders. You may come into my country. Chayoga, you will explain."

Frayne invited Yacupaz to eat with him, and then Chayoga told his story briefly. "I was tricked and tied up. My uncle found me, and learned what was going on. So we came by a short cut to warn you. Those fools were crazy with *tizwin.*

"Now, there are things Yacupaz wants me to explain—about your camp, and staying well away from the village. I will show you when we get there. First, you should give Yacupaz some presents. Me, I must speak to Doña Lorela, at once. Your pardon, but it is urgent."

Wayland went with him, and as they left the group, he said, "I know now that I was wrong about you, Chayoga. As for that knife, let us forget it. Whether you or Baycuri tried to finish me, it makes no difference. We both work for the same man."

Chayoga halted, folded his arms and stood before Wayland. He almost smiled as he said, "*Señor,* you are a brave man, not afraid to say you were wrong. Perhaps

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you were not as wrong as I was. You are also a very smart man, *señor*. Baycuri did not try to harm you."

"Is there peace between us, Chayoga?"

"We both work for the same master, *señor*."

Wayland's wristwatch had somehow survived plane crash and battle and flight and climbing. He took it off and handed it to Chayoga. "Take this, and give me your knife." With grave pleasure Chayoga made the exchange.

Lorela had been helping Tula beat out the smouldering patch in a tarpaulin. She came up now and said, "I am glad; it is right for you two to be friends. Santana, we owe you more than you ever owed us."

"It was nothing," Chayoga said. "Your father saved my freedom. Only Yacupaz could save your lives. But one thing, Doña. Lorela. You must wrap your shawl closely over your head. No one must see your red hair. No one must speak of it. I must tell the *tamenes*."

"My hair?"

"*Si*. I have no time to explain. Later, at the Lake of the Gods, you must dye it black. I will find the herbs. There is a witch in our village, and she hates Yacupaz and all his friends, and she must not know the color of your hair."

As Chayoga turned to call to a group of porters, Lorela said to Wayland, "I've got to be a brunette, because a witch doesn't like *rubias!* Don, what do you suppose this means?"

Wayland shrugged. "It beats me, but from now on, Chayoga can write his own ticket. I think I'd better be meeting the chief."

When he joined Frayne and Yacupaz, the old man was saying, "*Señor*, I sent those drunken fools back to the village. Your bombs sobered them. Unfortunately, three were killed, which they deserved, violating the safeguard I gave you. But Jalana hates all white people, and she will make much of your self-defense."

"You mean," Wayland asked, "that there'll be a feud between us and the relatives of the dead?"

"Is it not said: *Your leg belongs to you, even if it is lame?*"

"That is right, Yacupaz. But when your son forgets himself and insults his elders, don't you say: *Kill and I will bury?*"

"They will beat him, and I will beat him," Yacupaz agreed, thoroughly enjoying the apt retort. "You are right, but I must still warn you. Señor Frayne, do you still wish to go on? You are my nephew's friend, and I look on him as a son. So I do not want you to face this danger. It was bad enough before this fight, but now it is worse."

Frayne loaded his pipe. He refilled the chief's mug with coffee, and offered him tobacco. Then he said, "After seeing you this morning, I am not worried. When they saw you, they ran."

This answer pleased Yacupaz; as much, perhaps, as the new blanket, the canned goods, the hunting knife, and the pistol Frayne gave him.

"That dynamite," Wayland said, when the caravan finally got under way, "was worth the price and the risk, even if we don't get a chance to use it for blowing debris out of the old tunnels."

Keller was still shaking. "Buddy, if I'd known that the jackass just ahead of me was carrying them two cases up grade and down hill, I'd've croaked."

Wayland laughed and pointed at the trail that snaked up the face of a cliff. "Don't think *we've* been in any tough spots. Look at that shortcut Chayoga and Yacupaz took when they were in a hurry to get to us."

IT WAS shortly before sunset when the caravan cleared the last crest and descended toward the Lake of the Gods. Its surface was like a black opal, and at the further horn of its crescent the Bavispe ran in through a thick fringe of reeds. The overflow came from the nearer horn, and then raced down the gorge.

Frayne and Wayland stood there, looking at the terrain from an elevation. "Sure as you're alive, Don, it is artificial. That spillway must be lined with stones, or a couple of centuries of flood seasons would have

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cut a deep hole in the dam. And that is a dam. Nothing else."

"It does look as if it's artificial. But why?"

"If my guess is right," Frayne explained, "the Jesuits decided to hide the mine when they were ordered out of Mexico, and the rumors of their proposed expulsion gave them enough notice to do the work. There are only two ways. One, fill up the mouth of the shaft with rubbish, and level the buildings. Or, build a dam and let the lake flood the tunnels."

"Then they must reach in, horizontally, into the hill to the east?"

"Or anywhere along the further curve, the natural curve of the crescent," Frayne went on. "Which makes it difficult."

"Why?"

"If we try cutting the dam, which is not such a hard job, we'll have the Yaquis in a high rage about their sacred lake. The only way we can work is to sink exploration shafts, until we cut into some tunnel that is higher than the lake level, and then pick up the lode."

Finding the Tiopa, Wayland realized, was far from being all the task. And when he looked up and across the barranca, toward the Yaqui village on the ledge, he began to understand how strong a grip superstition had on the mountaineers. Rather than live close to the lake, they were cramped on that shelf of almost barren rock; during the dry season they had to carry water all the way from the Bavispe.

Women were picking tules from the stream that fed the lake, and others were climbing the steep path with bundles of them on their heads, or baskets of mud to patch their miserable huts. Only this fear, Wayland knew, had kept them from rushing him when his plane cracked up.

He could see the plane, long and red, one wing deep in the reeds along the concave curve of the crescent, the other jutting skyward. Oddly, the propeller had not been broken.

They followed the caravan down to the rock-strewn flats just east of the lake. Yacupaz said, "Stay close to the Lake of the Gods. My people fear it. I do not know why, but for more years than any man can count, it has been forbidden. You will be safe enough, and you can shoot ducks. But do not go hunting. Give me cartridges, and I will get you game."

After Yacupaz left for his village, Chayoga said, "He will, although his own people have little enough to eat." Then, to Lorela: "Here I have the herbs to dye your hair. I picked them on the way, and I will explain to your maid how to mix—"

"But why? I've been wondering all day about that."

Wayland and Frayne came up in time to hear Chayoga answer, "There is a witch, Jalana, a dangerous trouble-maker. She has been mumbling about a Golden Goddess rising from the lake and leading our people against the whites. Now, with your hair, *señorita,* you see how dangerous you could be. She would use you against your father's friends."

Wayland and Keller exchanged a long and sober look.

"Hey," Keller cut in, "you mean the lady wouldn't be in any danger herself; they'd be scared to knock her off account of her hair?"

"*Si, señor.* To use Doña Lorela against us, Jalana must make her an—what do you call it, *amo?*"

Frayne supplied the word. "But of course," Chayoga went on. "The incarnation of the Golden Goddess. So, she is safe."

"Well, that's something," Wayland said, and sighed. "That's something. Only, she's on the spot if she dyes her hair."

"We all are," Frayne said, "if she does not dye it."

Lorela cut into the argument that threatened. "I think I've got the right to decide about my own hair. Tula, take this stuff and mix it up. Don, shut up; I'm sick of red hair! If there's anything I don't want to be it's a Golden Goddess."

They watched her leave. Keller beamed. "There's a dame for you! Is she going to save her hide and get us all knocked off? No, sir!"

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CHAPTER XIII

IN SPITE OF SATAN

EVER since Lorela's flight from Guaymas, Elmer Dennis had been losing sleep. As he sat with big feet cocked up on his caoba wood desk, he chewed a frayed cigar, and rumpled his shock of sandy hair; he spat, missed the cuspidor, and turned bloodshot eyes toward Corey Ledgate. "Look here, Corey," he rumbled, as the senior partner's swivel chair swung smoothly about, "there's something stinking."

He planted his feet on the floor and heaved his big frame out of the chair. His broad shoulders hunched a little, so that his tweed coat crawled up toward the collar. Ledgate sighed and stroked a smoothly shaven chin. He did not look worried.

"Now, Elmer, what do you really know about this girl's disappearance?"

Ledgate's calmness checked Dennis, though the big fellow's hairy fists remained clenched, and he still had the nervous twitch of his eyelids, the result of not enough sleep and too much whisky. He said, "Plenty. She was going to meet me. I had a lot to tell her, and now she's gone for two days. I heard of a riot. One blue hell of a riot! I heard of a cab driver being missing, and the cops looking for him."

"You've been telling me this, with time to time additions, for the past forty-eight hours," Ledgate said. "Now, sit down, keep calm, and don't worry. The police have stopped looking for cab drivers and missing *prima donnas*. Everything will be all right —don't I know the chief of police?"

The implication was too strong for the worried man to miss, but the cool delivery of it, the smooth nerve of Corey Ledgate made him drop his fists instead of ploughing in. "Why, you lousy— You had her kidnaped. You bribed the hotel people. No wonder everyone lied and said she'd gone back to the States."

His voice cracked, and as the shock of Ledgate's effrontery wore off, Dennis reached for his partner. "Where is she? Quick, before I knock your head off!"

Ledgate did not budge, and he did not try to shake off the heavy hand that closed on his shoulder. He just looked up, sighed, smiled gently, and reached in his pocket. "Wait; I'll show a letter she left, and maybe you'll understand."

"Huh? Letter?" Dennis snatched the envelope. "How come she didn't send it direct to me?"

His change of expression prompted Ledgate's answer: "Well, old man, she wasn't eloping, if that is what you thought. The letter really wasn't addressed to you. Look at it."

Dennis frowned. "Huh. Addressed to her." He did not take the sheets from the envelope. "This isn't my business."

"Oh, yes it is. Let me read it to you."

He read the letter Mrs. Gilbert Frayne had written to her daughter. And before Dennis could digest all that it implied, Ledgate said, "You see, she is a phoney, spying on us and selling us out to her father. She was playing you for a sap, my boy, wheedling you into making her *prima donna,* and at the same time playing up to that blockhead of a Wayland so he'd doublecross us."

Dennis ran his fingers through his hair and groaned. "Lissen—where is she?"

"Frankly, I do not know. She gave us the slip. When she heard of Wayland's crackup, she dropped out of character, as I told you. And I judged from your change of expression that you'd talked too much to her, so I had her room searched. And I found this."

"So you tried to have her murdered? Kidnapped?"

LEDGATE had to keep Dennis from going amuck. Inwardly, the smooth, dark man was fighting one of the hardest battles of his life, for if his unruffled front showed the least sign of cracking, he knew that he would be lucky to escape with a month or two in a hospital.

"Now Elmer, you know murder is a nasty and impracticable thing, particularly with Guaymas being dressed up for the West Coast tourists. No, I wanted her detained so she could not get in touch with her father and warn him."

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"Where is she?"

"I told you I don't know. She got away, along with that battle-ax of a maid. They wouldn't listen, and that leather-faced wench almost murdered a couple of men when she found out that her mistress was not going to speak to a native—a purely imaginary native—who had word that Wayland is alive."

Dennis muttered something unintelligible. He put his elbows on his knees, and supported his chin on his palms. He was worried now, trying to remember how much he had told Lorela about the Tiopa Mine. Finally he said gloomily, "Well, I guess we are out on a limb. I was a chump, all right. And she's on the loose, ready to sink us. The *politicos* would listen to Frayne's daughter, where they wouldn't pay any attention to a *bailarina!*"

Ledgate had won, so he rose and laid a hand on his partner's shoulder. "Buck up, Elmer! If she had told any official about my little surprise party, we would have heard of it before now. Live and learn, my boy. After all, now that her father is in the mountains, it would be hard for her to get a messenger to trail him with details about a crescent-shaped lake."

Dennis groaned. Then he straightened up, and brightened a little. "Look here, you! Wayland was mooning around her, and you had to tell him just how the lake looked, or he couldn't have found it. So it was you who let that out, not me."

Ledgate could have pointed out that his partner undoubtedly had told Lorela a good many details which Wayland did not know. But he was magnanimous; as long as Dennis did not learn too many facts about the pursuit by Uriel Ybarra and his ruffians, there would be no dissension. Thus far, Ledgate had not heard from Ybarra, but he was convinced that Lorela would not reach her father, that she would have no chance to cause trouble. Ybarra was a dependable man.

IT WAS not until four days later that Ledgate heard from Uriel Ybarra, who had survived the battle in the Rio Yaqui gorge. The ruffian returned on an evening train from Tonichi, and on a stretcher. Between bullets and machete cuts, this had been the closest scrape of the past forty lawless years, but vitality and wrath had driven him; and his surviving followers had gotten him to the semi-weekly train just in time to avoid another three-day delay.

So here he was, on a stretcher that two porters carried into Corey Ledgate's house in a modern *colonia* on the beach, well out of range of the fisherman's wharf. Ledgate hurried after the servant who had announced the arrival, and met his trouble-shooter in the red-tiled vestibule.

"Que tal, amo?" the wounded man said, and grinned behind his bandages. "Pardon me if I do not rise to salute you."

The harsh voice would have identified Ybarra even if the porters had not announced his name. Ledgate said, "Bring him in here, into the *sala.* Handle him carefully!" Then, following the stretcher into the living room with its dark Spanish furniture, he said: "What happened? How did it turn out? Did you succeed?"

"Así, así!" Ybarra's one exposed eye flashed warningly. He would not commit himself to more than, "so-so," until he was propped up in a comfortable and quite un-Spanish lounging chair, and the big iron studded doors were closed.

Then he said, "Now that we are alone, *señor,* I say, feed me to the crabs. I have made a mess of it. That maid sliced me a pretty one with a pair of long scissors, she almost killed one of my men and the *rubia* herself screamed so loud that cab driver got scared and wheeled around. In spite of Satan and an ox-cart and a rocky field, he got her back to the hotel. I take it that you got the letters I stole from her room before—"

"Yes, yes, of course!" Ledgate said. "You found one, an old one, so I had you—ah—attend to her, and one of your men brought the final one." He referred to the letter that had upset Elmer Dennis. "But where is she?"

"Figure it out for yourself," Ybarra

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grumbled. "Have I been playing games in the mountains, or where have I been if not some marches beyond Tonichi?"

"What?" Ledgate for once moved hastily, and without grace. "Tonichi, some marches beyond Tonichi? Is she crazy, going into that country?"

"*Ay, chinga'o!* Of course she is crazy. So was I, crazy with luck to catch a train almost in time to nail her in Tonichi, and crazy enough then to chase her on horse and on foot up that accursed Rio Yaqui, hot as Satan's hoofs by day, freezing cold by night."

"Hmmm" Ledgate made some quick calculations. "You waited a few hours before you could get a train from here. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I tell you two women made a fool of me? *Señor,* it amazes me that I am telling you of that now. Only my devotion, my high sense of honor, my stern sense of duty to the master whose hands I kiss—"

"Never mind the sarcasm, Uriel," Ledgate said, grimacing wryly. "As a matter of business, you came back to make another trial." Before Ybarra could protest, he went on, "What happened? Let's forget this oration on duty until I find out how you did it. Is she lost in the mountains?"

"Alas, no. *Ay de mi,* she got away, her guard of Yaquis put up a crazy fight, and Satan helped her! Who ran into us but her father, for he was encamped near by and heard the shooting."

Ledgate stepped back a pace and stood there, silent. His mouth was tight, and he shook his head; he was quite out of words. Ybarra grinned appreciatively, and forgave his chief's earlier outburst, for here was a story that warranted a blast. Finally Ledgate said, "A brisk fight, and then Frayne—Frayne of all people—pulls the girl out of the trap?"

"Worse than that, *señor.* Indeed—"

A rumble of voices outside, in the vestibule, checked both sides of the discussion. Someone boomed, "Open that door, or I'll knock your head off. I do not care who the master is talking to; I want to see him, do you hear!"

THE blow of a fist was followed by a groan and a thump; the door of the *sala* slammed open, and Elmer Dennis bounded in. "Sorry I had to cool your flunkey, Corey, but I heard Ybarra came back on a stretcher and I want to hear what's what?"

Ybarra did not know what a trying hour Ledgate had spent with Dennis, a few days previous; he was flattered to think that the assistant *jefe* of the company had hurried from the Silver Tower to welcome him back.

So he blurted out, "*Señor,* as I was saying, I would have grabbed that damned *rubia* but for her father and that Wayland shooting the guts out of my men!"

Ledgate had no chance to shout him down, and then Dennis, his dinner clothes all awry, had thrust him aside and stepped up to the bandaged Ybarra. Dennis roared, "You what? You met her and her father and Wayland?"

Ybarra had never tried to keep track of the assistant *jefe's* love life, so the wounded man eagerly offered more details to excuse his failure. "*Ay,* does it not manifest itself, *señor,* that my men met a large and well armed party, well armed ruffians under this Frayne and this traitor of a Wayland? It is by the grace of the holy saints that I am here alive!"

Dennis ceased shouting. His voice was low and biting when he said to Ledgate, "So that is it. You sent Ybarra out to murder her."

Ledgate made a gesture. "Let's not quarrel, Elmer. Look at the mess. Wayland alive, teamed up with Frayne. . . . Ybarra, do you know he's alive?"

"Did I not hear him hunting for me, swearing he would cut my heart out for chasing that accursed redheaded wench? Wounded, not a shell left, I was under a rock, in ice water How I ever lived to find a few men not too badly hurt to get me back to Tonichi, only the blessed saints know!"

Dennis had ceased storming, and sat there looking strangely worn; his broad shoulders sagged, and his heavy face was

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slack. Ledgate was relieved, and said: "I've been in touch with an old witch by the name of Jalana, up there in the Yaqui country. I'm paying her to influence the tribe around the Rio Bavispe not to bargain with anyone but us."

"Huh? I don't remember—" Dennis frowned.

"No, I didn't tell you, wasn't any need. This tribal witch has a relative in jail in Chihuahua and I can put in a word with the governor, one way or the other. So she has to deal honestly by us.

"There is a tribe right near a crescent-shaped lake. The one Harper saw when he went to look for Wayland. An old fellow named Yacupaz is chief, but Jalana is the real power. So, if Frayne does go on, his man Chayoga can't help him quite enough. But if the witch has as much influence as the average medicine man, we'll get a decent reception."

"So that's your play?"

"Yes," Ledgate answered. "But first of all, I'm sending Harper back for another flight over the country between here and the lake where he saw Wayland's plane. To check up and see if Frayne is moving into the mountains, or whether he's been blocked."

And the meeting broke up with Ledgate convinced that he had pacified his partner, now that it was definite that Lorela had not been harmed. He had expected more opposition.

SMOKE thickened the cathedral dimness of the Ledgate and Dennis offices the following day. The two partners were at their desk; Ledgate was lighting a cigarette, and Dennis fished for another cigar to chew to pieces. Neither spoke; they were listening to the short, stocky man who had told of Don Wayland's crackup.

Len Harper said, "So now this dame that thought I was Frankenstein has gone and took a powder, huh? Well, well." He lifted a square, greasy hand to his square, greasy face and rubbed his cheek. "She did slap me."

Corey Ledgate had a tiny frown, for it irritated him to see a man in a greasy leather jacket and dungarees lolling in a Spanish leather chair. "Please," he said acidly, "tell us what you did see. We all remember this girl, we remember her all too clearly. What did you *see?*"

"Oh, what did I see? Uh—oh, yeah. Well, some jackasses and some Indios and a couple white fellows—no, three white fellows by a lake. You know, that kind of half-moon-shaped lake where I seen that red plane cracked up and got my own fuselage so full of arrows she looked like a porcupine."

Ledgate groaned. Dennis got on his feet and made a gesture of impatience. Only Harper remained calm. "Take it easy, gents, one at a time. Rome wasn't built in a day. I told you—"

"Blue-hell!" Dennis stormed. "Did you see Lorela, the girl who slapped you?"

"There was two dames," Len Harper said, quite unperturbed by everyone else's agitation. A man who has smuggled Chinese across the border is not easily excited. "There was two, and I'm a stranger in Guaymas, and I only met one of them, and she slapped my face."

"How," Ledgate said, smooth again, "did you know there were white people by the lake?"

"People still look up and gawk when I boot one past," Harper modestly said. "And a white face carries a long ways. Yeah, three guys, and a white gal, and I don't know how many Indios and burros. And a Mexican woman."

"Shoot at you?" Ledgate asked. "The Yaquis, I mean."

"Nah."

"But they did the first time?"

"Uh-huh. Arrows—say, you should have seen that crate, she looked like one of those archery things. But none this time."

Ledgate turned to Dennis. "Do you see? I'm getting the situation in hand, up there. They no longer shoot at my employees."

"Nuts! Neither do they shoot at Frayne and his employees," Dennis said, bitterly.

"Now, Elmer." Ledgate looked bland. "Let's hear Len's report. How, for instance,

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does the ground look? Near the lake, I mean."

"Oh, the ground. Well, it's rocky; maybe a miracle man could set a crate down in shape to be taken up again. Me, I'd not try it, and I'm one of the best."

"Landing aliens in box canyons in Arizona, I guess a fellow has to be good," Dennis said.

Len Harper was modest about that. "Not only just good, he's got to be one of the best, buddy. Only, I'd not set one down around that lake. That Wayland wasn't good, he was just lucky to live."

LEDGATE began to pace slowly up and down the room, his head bowed. Abruptly he snapped: "Rack your brains, man, and tell me some way to fly into the mountains and land a plane near that lake, and then take off again! Something is wrong up there. No one fired at you, and no one was firing at Frayne's party."

"Just one big happy family, boss," Harper said. "But you need a flock of angels, that's what you need, to land and take off. Can't be done with a plane."

"Something," Ledgate said, very quietly, "has gone wrong. Too much sweetness and light up there. That treacherous Frayne has corrupted the Yaquis with bribes, turned their witch woman against us."

Suddenly his deep set eyes blazed. He swung around, and his voice was rough in the anger now. "Harper, you fool, think of something! You're a flyer—"

"One of the best. In my racket, you'd better be." He slid forward in his chair, and let his legs stretch out. Then he sat up with an excited movement. "Hey! Hold it! Pipe down, boss, pipe down!"

"What?" Ledgate stared. "What?"

"I got it! We get a hydroplane. I know a guy in Mazatlán that's got one, a good one, and can I set one down! Say, I can set one down in a bathtub. She'll carry enough guys and guns to stand off the Yaquis if they get fresh, or anyone else. We'll be setting out on the lake, and who's going to get at us, huh?"

Ledgate stared a moment longer, and then slowly he began to smile. His shoulders seemed to relax and he came forward to Harper. He said softly, "We need that hydroplane; get it at once!"

Harper went out, whistling softly. He liked the prospect of a hydroplane armed with a machine gun, and manned by a handful of Ybarra's sturdy fellows. It would be a cinch, freighting machinery to that mine, when the wrangling was finally over. Look at the way they took a big gold dredger to pieces and flew it into the interior of New Guinea, section by section. He had an eye to the future, and what he saw looked good.

Just because a job was legitimate didn't mean that it might not pay better than running aliens, where you had to pay off everybody and his brother, and still had to contend with the Border Patrols who were too dumb to take a payoff.

Dennis made several false starts at speech, and then he got up from his desk. He reached for his hat, and headed for the door. Ledgate said, "Things look a lot better now, don't they?"

Dennis wheeled about. "Better! You're getting so close to assassination the difference isn't worth mentioning! This lousy business—"

"Elmer, listen to me. We are over-extended, a lot of notes are due, that Silver Tower is not making its heavy expenses, and with the new labor laws beginning to use their teeth, our plantations are a dead loss. If we do not find a gold mine, we are totally finished."

"So you're flying a bunch of mugs up there to mop up. Peddling a bale of stock in a one-in-a-million chance mine is one thing, and sending for Ybarra's pearling crew is something else."

Ledgate sighed and prayed for patience. "Elmer, that girl will not be hurt. Please believe me, I'll take care of that."

"A lot you can do"

"That witch, Jalana, has almost the influence of the chief," Ledgate explained, "and Jalana has to toe the mark with me, or else her relative stays in the jail where he's been for the past two years. If I tell

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her to, she'll see that your redhead isn't harmed."

Dennis was dubious. "I wish I could count on that."

Ledgate threw back his head, and extended his hand. "Count on me, Elmer. Count on me. You've done me a great injustice, thinking I'd make war on a girl. Hamper her freedom of movement, yes. But not actual violence, that fool Ybarra exaggerated."

"I hope I can count on that, Corey," the big man said, and walked out.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ROAD TO ELDORADO

WHEN Lorela emerged from her brush shelter, she no longer wore the shawl that had concealed her hair on the last day's march. Wayland was startled by the transformation, for not only had her copper-colored hair become as black as Tulsa's, but her skin was now several shades darker than the faint tan which the mountain sun had given her.

"Am I really such a fright?" She laughed at his expression. "Anyway, it is a novelty, isn't it?"

"How long will that last?" Wayland demanded, coming closer. "Let's see how it looks under stronger light."

He took the lantern, held it first on one side, then the other. Chayoga and Tula stood by, nodding approval. The Yaqui said, "Those herbs will not fade for a long time. But when the time comes, wash it with boiled bay leaves, and you become a *rubia* again, *señorita.*"

Lorela looked into her tiny mirror again. "This is thrilling; I almost think I've discovered a new self. Don, would you want me to stay this way?"

He shook his head. "When you were a redhead, you caused me plenty of trouble, but I got used to it. I kind of liked it, in fact. Go back to red, darling."

He looked at her for a long, lingering moment; her eyes met his. Then the spell dissolved, and they were smiling together, friends.

Beyond the lake, and far up on the shelf at the opposite side of the *barranca,* the tribal cooking fires flickered in the gloom; but the sun, not yet quite quenched in the far-off waters of the Gulf of California, painted the two snow-tipped peaks a smouldering red. Before the fall of darkness, Wayland had noticed the brush shelters, and the mouths of the tunnels that dotted the face of the cliff which overhung the shelf.

"Chayoga," he asked, when the *capatáz* emptied his second mug of coffee and twisted a corn-husk cigarette, "why do your people live in those shelters? I notice women going up that steep trail with reeds and brush. Aren't the caves dry enough, or am I mistaken about those three tiers of openings?"

"I've been wondering too," Frayne cut in.

Chayoga answered, "They are dry, yes, and large enough, but our people are afraid. Those caves were dug by the Ancient People, and that they have been dead for centuries makes no difference. We fear their ghosts. Maybe it is because our ancestors killed them all. Only a medicine man or a witch can risk it."

It was silly of course; but there was a quality, a foreboding, in his voice that made his words seem oddly believable. What would have seemed quite absurd in, say, a Manhattan cocktail bar, became out here not merely credible but probable and true.

Wayland was thinking, "That Jalana probably established herself as a witch simply by getting up nerve enough to go into those cliff dwellings, and by coming out alive again."

"Jalana," Lorela began, "is a rather unpleasant person, it seems. What is this Golden Goddess business? I mean, how can she work against the chief of the tribe? I've always heard women were just drudges, and didn't have a thing to say."

"That's what your mother always told me, and she wasn't referring to Yaqui squaws," Frayne said, chuckling. "But it's perhaps as much exaggerated among the

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Yaquis as it was back home. Chayoga, let's hear your ideas."

"Women," he began, "always hate men, even those they love. And so also with men, they hate all women, and they fear them. Each is jealous, no? And there are old, old stories about women ruling tribes, and making the men slaves who went to hunt, to herd cattle, to fight—to do these things and yet not sit in council."

"What a life!" Keller muttered.

"That is perhaps how the Golden Goddess story started, *amo*. Maybe she is some long forgotten *rubia* who made men obey her, and when men finally began to rule, the women kept the story alive, a hope of some day getting back the power. Figure it for yourself, *caballeros y damas!*" His gesture included Tula, who sat respectfully at one side and behind Lorela. "We have had wars, famines; there are so few men left, that this Jalana plots against Yacupaz."

"Funny she'd have that story cooked up," Frayne remarked.

Wayland shook his head. "A scrambled legend, and then maybe our buddies, Ledgate and Dennis, sent a tame Yaqui to tell the witch about Lorela. I bet we've been under the eye of spies ever since we met."

It was indeed a conceivable theory; but it was not exactly more comfortable merely because it was so logical.

"That is well said, *señor*," Chayoga said. He rose, bowed ceremoniously. "*Buenos noches, señores!*"

IN THE morning, Frayne and Wayland and Keller began to look over the ground along the outlet side of the lake, where water flowed over a rocky ledge to feed the Rio Bavispe. On the east was a cliff fully as high and steep as the one that made the western wall of the *barranca*, the one on whose projecting ledge the Yaqui village was perched. From edge to edge, the *barranca* was about a mile wide, but to get from one lip to a point exactly opposite would involve a march of twenty or thirty miles.

"Hello! More cliff dwellings," Frayne said, pointing.

The openings were much nearer the ground than those above the Yaqui village; and there were only two tiers, the upper of which had undoubtedly been reached by long-vanished wooden ladders. Keller said, "I guess they're just as hoodooed as those across the canyon."

Wayland laughed. "Probably worse, for they're a lot easier to get at, and still the Yaquis aren't using them."

They circled back toward the overflow. It became more and more certain that the concave curvature of the bank that made the water back up a quarter of a mile or more into the *barranca* was artificial. There was no place nearby from which a landslide could possibly have started; moreover, it was entirely beyond any chance of natural freaks to have a slide of earth and rock shape itself as this steep dam across the Bavispe's bed was.

"That earth," Frayne declared, "was hauled into place."

They squatted beside the gap in the reeds, where the current was too swift to permit their growth. Wayland caught Frayne's arm. "Look! Watch that water! I got a glimpse of joints in the rock bottom. It's a spillway lined with masonry."

Frayne rose, after a moment of intent peering. He got a stick, and thrust it into the water, probing and prodding. When he turned to Wayland, his hand and his voice trembled. "Regular surface. Masonry, no doubt. Something big. Who'd build a dam out here? Why? To hide a mine. My guess, my reasoning, they're justified!"

His keen eyes squinted, and his face held the look of one who has sudden understanding of many things—of more things than he is ready to discuss. He could wait.

Keller stood there, blinking. He gulped, and finally said, "Where's the gold?"

"It is where we'll find it, Herb," Frayne answered. "I'm sorry I lost my head. Nothing is justified until the actual lode is discovered. Not even abandoned workings prove anything."

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This cool speech sobered Wayland. For the next few hours, Frayne went about, sizing up the rock strata of the walls, of the river bottom, of the meadow at the foot of the dam. Thick grass carpeted it, for no summer was ever dry enough to keep it from getting plenty of seepage from the dammed-up waters of the Lake of the Gods.

The *tamenes,* working under Chayoga's sharp eye, were making crude walls of boulders, and reinforcing the flimsy brush shelters with saplings. Some were picking *tules* from the lake and weaving them into mats for roofing or for the walls. Others got baskets of lake mud so that burning arrows would not a second time cause trouble in camp.

The dynamite was buried deep, and well to one side of the barricade. All was quiet and peaceful. Gaunt Yaqui women filed up the steep trail from the *barranca* bottom to the village, but Chayoga was not taking any chances.

Late in the afternoon, two tribesmen came to the camp. They had a deer slung from a pole they carried across their shoulders. This they laid at the gate of the enclosure, and then stalked away, looking neither right nor left. The buck had been killed by an arrow, since bullets were too expensive for routine business. Yacupaz, true to his word, was supplying his guests with food.

A whirring overhead, a familiar enough drumming to Wayland and his companions but startling to the Yaquis, interrupted all activities about the lake. Chayoka's *tamenes* dropped their material and implements and looked up, pointing and chattering.

A PLANE was black against the sky; it circled, and now it was well below the two gleaming peaks. Once it had mountains instead of glowing sky as a background, Wayland could distinguish the blue and chrome that gleamed as she spiraled down a thousand feet.

He stood there, legs straddled, shoulders back, and eyes slanted against the molten sky. Then, softly, he cursed.

The motor's voice now filled the *barranca,* and the walls flung back the steady roar; echo and re-echo, reverberation doubled by its own reflection from the opposite wall.

On the ledge, a thousand feet above the floor, women and children and what few warriors had remained in camp dashed from the shelter of the cliff's overhang. They were black, and small from distance, and their voices could not carry through the engine roar.

Frayne ran for his glasses, but handed them to Wayland. "You look, Don. See what they're going to do!"

"One of the Indios fired a shot," Keller said, "don't need no glass—"

"Right." Wayland had the eyepieces focused. "Couldn't hear the sound. There's a weird-looking old woman coming on the run, she's grabbed his arm, he's lowered his gun, he's backing away from her. By the way he's moving, he's scared—"

"Yeah, and he stumbled over a dog and landed smack on his face. I wish he'd had slipped over the edge," Keller cut in.

"Jalana, eh?" Frayne said, very slowly, and shaking his head. "I'm afraid, Don, I'm afraid that you're all too right. That witch for some reason doesn't want anyone to fire on a blue plane."

That was funny too, Dan decided; and as soon as there was time for anything like sound and consecutive thought, he would attempt to puzzle out the reason for it.

Lorela and Tula had come on the run. Grinding cornmeal could wait until later. The plane had made another great spiral, and it was down another thousand feet; it circled over the lake, out over the meadow. The pilot waved, and did a wing-over.

Something fell from the cockpit, and a tiny parachute blossomed white. When the pilot saw that it would be carried clear of the *tule* fringe of the lake, he leveled off and began climbing in ever widening spirals.

An air pocket let him drop five hundred feet. "I bet his teeth rattled," Keller said, squinting up. "Boy, now look at him!"

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Another current had caught the plane, this time sending it up. A *tamen* ran to get the miniature parachute. Lorela, breathless, caught her father's arm. "Dad, that must be Len Harper, the substitute pilot who went out to see if Don had cracked up. Harper had a blue plane. Isn't that what you told me, Tula?"

"Si, señorita. Azul y plata."

"Plug him!" Keller yelled, and hobbled toward the men's shack. "I'll fix him. Snooping, huh?"

"Wait a second, Herb, we don't know who it is, or why—"

"Nuts!" Before anyone could stop, Keller had a rifle leveled. Then he lowered it. "The way that crate's bouncing around, a fellow couldn't hit it with a machine gun. Why didn't we shake the lead out when we had the chance, instead of gawking!"

Frayne had taken the message from the *tamen*. "Listen to this," he said, though his change of expression had made it quite needless for him to ask for silence. He read, *"Frayne, get out while you can. The government is moving troops further into the hills, and that will annoy the Yaquis, and you know what they do when they are annoyed. You are the whites nearest their camp. Simple, isn't it?"*

It was signed, *Corey Ledgate,* but the penciled scrawling and grease smudges showed that the pilot had written the message while circling, a message suited to the situation as observed from the air.

Wayland's face had lengthened. "He's got us there. If he can wheedle one of the district military commanders to march a squadron as far as Tonichi, there'll be hell popping here, and no matter what Yacupaz tries to do to help us. And what kind of a colonel wouldn't oblige a nice fellow like Ledgate?"

He stared over the lake, frowning.

Lorela's laugh was convincing. "Let's eat, and then we'll find the mine before any garrison commander moves troops. Come on, Don."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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MEN of
MODERN D'ARTAGNAN
JOSEPH BOYLE WAS DESTINED BY HIS CANADIAN PARENTS FOR THE LAW BUT LEFT COLLEGE AT 17 FOR THE MORE ADVENTUROUS LIFE OF A SAILOR. WHEN HIS SHIP SPRANG A LEAK OFF SOUTH AFRICA, JOE, A QUARTERMASTER, KEPT THE REBELLIOUS CREW AT THE PUMPS UNTIL THEY REACHED BOMBAY OVER 4,000 MILES AWAY!
JOE BOYLE
JOINING THE YUKON GOLD RUSH, HE BECAME LEGENDARY FOR HIS STRENGTH AND DARING. ONCE HE NEGOTIATED HAZARDOUS CHILCOOT PASS DURING A BLIZZARD AND WAS FORCED TO CARRY HIS FATIGUED COMPANIONS ON HIS SHOULDERS, ONE AT A TIME, THROUGH SNOW DRIFTS AND ICE-JAMMED RIVERS.
AT THE OUTBREAK OF THE WORLD WAR HE ORGANIZED A MACHINE-GUN COMPANY OF 50 SOURDOUGHS. BOYLE, WITH THE RANK OF COLONEL, WAS SENT TO RUSSIA TO UNTANGLE THE SNARLED RAILROAD SITUATION. HE MOVED SUPPLIES WITH THE THREAT OF HIS FIST AND, WITH A RUSSIAN DEATH BATTALION OF AMAZONS, BLUFFED THE GERMANS AWAY FROM TARNPOOL.

A True Story in Pictures

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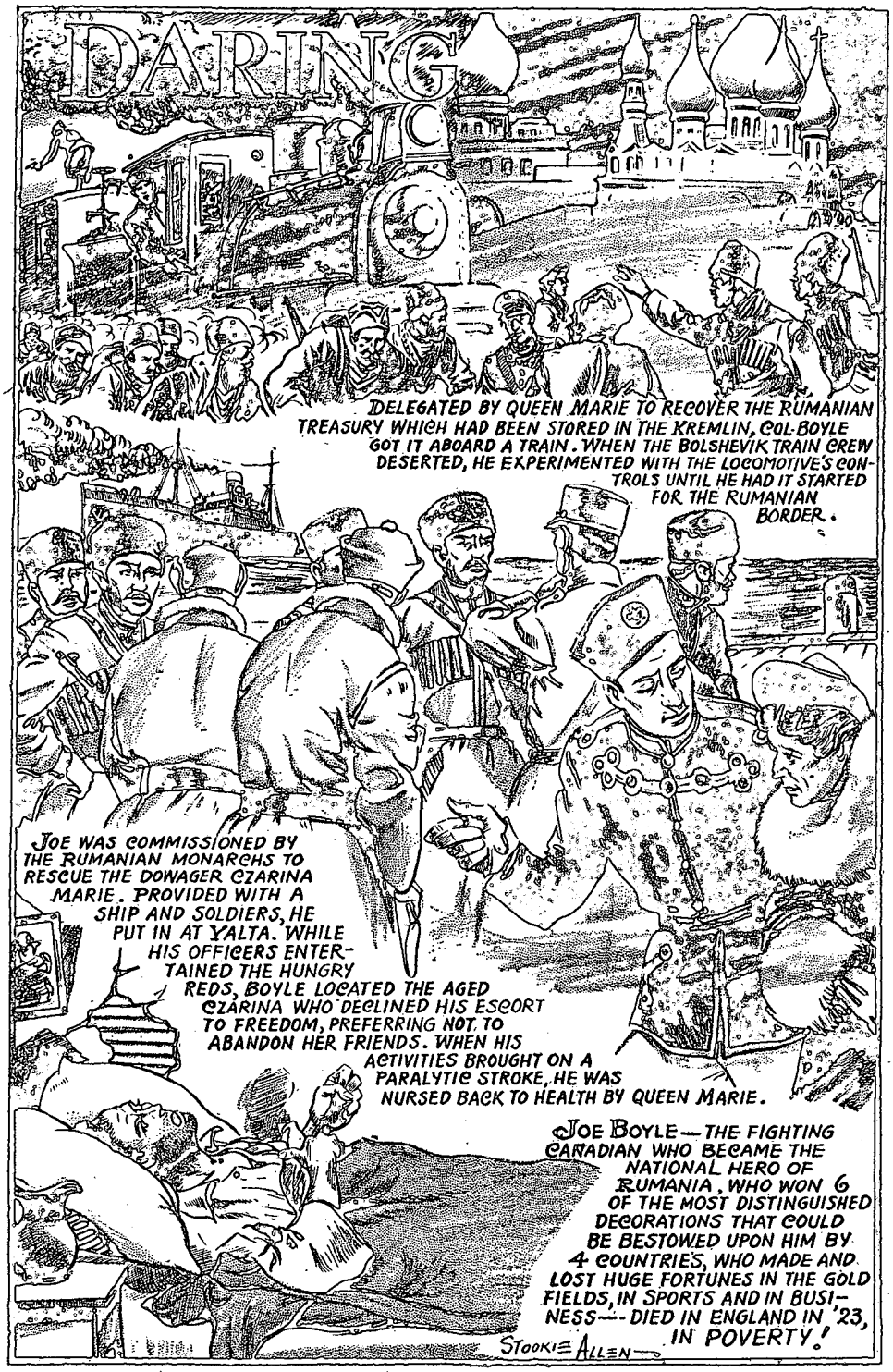
DARING
DELEGATED BY QUEEN MARIE TO RECOVER THE RUMANIAN TREASURY WHICH HAD BEEN STORED IN THE KREMLIN, COL. BOYLE GOT IT ABOARD A TRAIN. WHEN THE BOLSHEVIK TRAIN CREW DESERTED, HE EXPERIMENTED WITH THE LOCOMOTIVE'S CONTROLS UNTIL HE HAD IT STARTED FOR THE RUMANIAN BORDER.
JOE WAS COMMISSIONED BY THE RUMANIAN MONARCHS TO RESCUE THE DOWAGER CZARINA MARIE. PROVIDED WITH A SHIP AND SOLDIERS, HE PUT IN AT YALTA. WHILE HIS OFFICERS ENTERTAINED THE HUNGRY REDS, BOYLE LOCATED THE AGED CZARINA WHO DECLINED HIS ESCORT TO FREEDOM, PREFERRING NOT TO ABANDON HER FRIENDS. WHEN HIS ACTIVITIES BROUGHT ON A PARALYTIC STROKE, HE WAS NURSED BACK TO HEALTH BY QUEEN MARIE.
JOE BOYLE—THE FIGHTING CANADIAN WHO BECAME THE NATIONAL HERO OF RUMANIA, WHO WON 6 OF THE MOST DISTINGUISHED DECORATIONS THAT COULD BE BESTOWED UPON HIM BY 4 COUNTRIES, WHO MADE AND LOST HUGE FORTUNES IN THE GOLD FIELDS, IN SPORTS AND IN BUSINESS—DIED IN ENGLAND IN '23, IN POVERTY!
STOOKIE ALLEN

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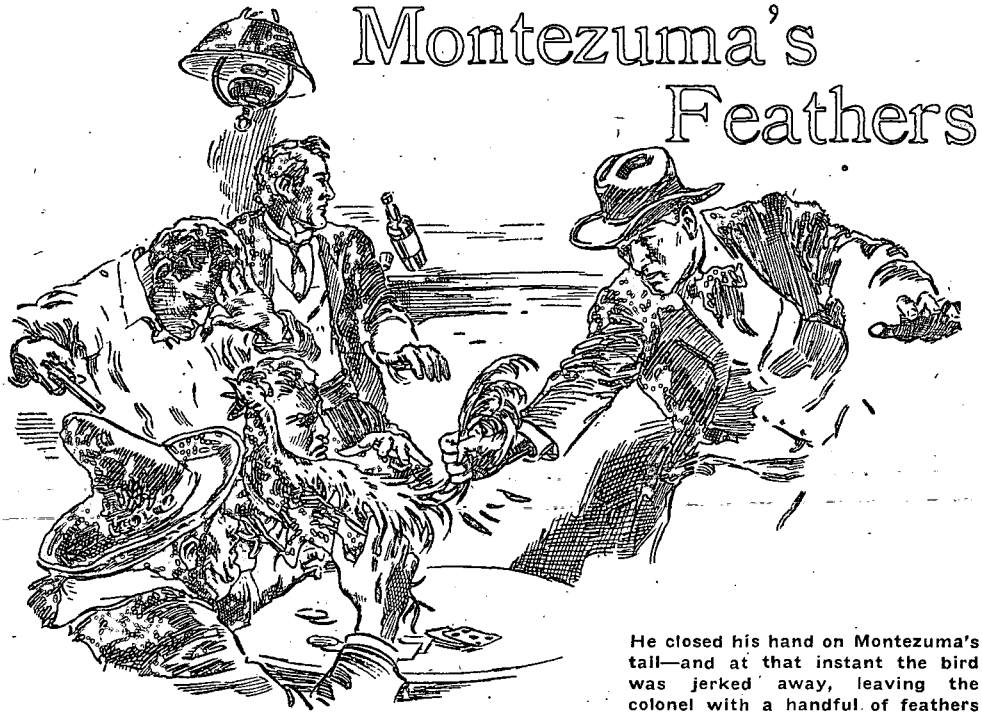
Montezuma's Feathers



He closed his hand on Montezuma's tail—and at that instant the bird was jerked away, leaving the colonel with a handful of feathers

Introducing the much-sought-after Colonel Merriwether Bean, gentleman of the Old South, in a diverting little game entitled *el gallo*, or how to eat a rooster without cooking it

By ALLAN R. BOSWORTH

Author of "Down Went McGinty," "Oh, the Monkeys Have No Tails," etc.

HE CONSIDERED a wagon plebeian; and besides, there was always the chance he might desire faster transportation out of town. So Colonel Merriwether Bean camped two miles out on the mesquite-covered prairie, and rode in after dark on the roan, which was the swifter horse.

A railroad was being built, booming the town and drawing all manner of people to it; there was a rawness about the place, with mud in the rutted streets and a smell of wet pine lumber and harness oil.

The colonel rode around the block and tied his horse to a cottonwood at the rear of the Palace Bar.

He hadn't been in the saloon five minutes before realizing he had fallen into a den of blackguards and thieves, or—as he expressed it in one word—damyankees.

Their talk lay harsh in his aristocratic ears, the bartender's conception of a mint julep was distorted, and the colonel had no doubt that a good rebel yell would clear the place in two shakes, even if the War had been over for twenty years.

But he didn't give the yell, having no desire to attract undue attention. Listening to the alien chatter, he wondered whether the entire town was thus peopled, and briefly debated the idea of making himself less conspicuous by dropping the Colonel from his name.

His title was neither military nor honorary; he had won it at cards on a dozen river boats, along with quite a bit of dam-

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yankee money—subsequently spent. They were still looking for him all the way from St. Louis to New Orleans, and there was no telling how far westward the arm of the law might reach.

When it became necessary to make a living the hard way, the colonel could always sell a lightning rod or two. But just now he had forty dollars. Properly handled, there was no limit to the proportions this sum might attain.

HE STOOD, tall and spare in a frayed black broadcloth coat and gray trousers, at the bar, and saw the three men who came in. Two of them were obviously gamblers, and therefore not the men the colonel sought.

But the other was a Mexican who carried a fighting cock under his arm. It was a red bird—a Roundhead of good breed if the colonel ever saw one—with mussed feathers and blood on its comb. And there was no mistaking the gleam of victory in the gamecock's eyes.

The three took seats at a table nearby, and the red-faced man whose cigar seemed to be screwed into his tight mouth yelled: "Charlie!" At this the bartender hurried over with a fresh deck and a bottle of Bourbon.

"Put this in the cash drawer," ordered the red-faced one. He handed Charlie a roll of bills that made the colonel's mouth water.

"Montezuma won, eh?" Charlie said. "Anything else, Mr. Saunders?"

Saunders shook his head. "Not now. Get back there and tend to the trade. But if that Texas outfit drifts in here, let me know at once. They'll not wreck my place."

The colonel's eyes followed Charlie and the money, and noted with what tender care the bartender placed the greenbacks in the wide cash drawer. Then he looked back at the gamecock, and at the bird's guardian, reflecting that the last time he had seen a cockfight was in Natchez, and a Roundhead like this one had killed a Carolina Blue.

They were having a drink before cutting the cards. The Mexican was what his countrymen would call *muy panzon*—a big-bellied man. His face was like a full copper moon, beaming with placid good humor and framed by an ornate sombrero shoved far back on his head.

He had practically no neck, so that the folds of the red-and-green serape draping his shoulder touched the lobe of his ear. Smoke from a corn-shuck cigarette curled across his unwinking, imperturbable eyes.

When the colonel studied the man's eyes, he wasn't so sure that the red-faced Saunders and the other gambler, a thin, sharp-featured man, were going to take the Mexican down the line.

It had been the colonel's rule never to gamble with another professional if he knew it. But there was the Roundhead. A link with a more leisurely, prosperous past; a bird that, given proper handling, would reciprocate by very properly taking care of his owner. . . .

HIS forty dollars ran up to a hundred and ten, while the Mexican lost steadily. Then the colonel's luck changed, and he dropped back to his original forty. The Mexican was broke.

"Montezuma is lucky for you, Bustamente," Saunders said. For a damyankee, his voice could be unusually soft and persuasive. "Of course, if you don't want to bet the bird, I'll buy him. Thirty dollars."

"Forty," said the sharp-faced man, whose name was Blake.

Not being able to outbid that, the colonel sat tight. "*Por Dios!*" exclaimed Bustamente. "Sell Montezuma? No!" And he lifted the gamecock and kissed it on the bill. "But I will put heem up—for forty dollars!"

The colonel let his cards lie without looking at the first round. Nobody was going to raise, anyway. It was plain, now, that Saunders and Blake had been after the fighting cock all the time.

The colonel felt their tenseness and saw them watching each other closely; Saunders was dealing, and Blake obviously didn't trust the saloon owner.

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The colonel sighed and looked at his face-down cards, and knew that tomorrow he would have to sell lightning rods. Then the bartender was at the table, saying in a strained voice: "Them Texans are here, and—"

Saunders didn't hear. "Don't bother me!" he growled, and up front there was a rebel yell, and the crowd didn't stampede according to the colonel's expectations. Saunders slapped his cards down triumphantly.

"Full house!" he cried, in a tone too excited for a professional gambler to use. "I win, Bustamente. Give me that rooster!"

"Wait a minute," protested Blake. "I've got four of a kind, Saunders. *I'll* take—"

It was then that the shooting started, and the place began to dim. Every shot extinguished a lamp. Saunders raked in the money and swore as he ran for the bar. Just before he reached it, a card fell from his sleeve.

Both the colonel and Bustamente saw it, and from where they were sitting it looked like an ace. Their eyes met briefly over the table while the guns blasted and the darkness grew; it was the pained look of a Southern gentleman, and a gentleman from the Deeper South.

Blake was still yelling for the rooster; and as the last light winked out, the colonel saw him reaching for it.

It was one of those dark moments when alliances are quickly made, or as quickly broken. The colonel couldn't bear to think of the Roundhead in the hands of a damyankee, so he snatched at the gamecock himself.

His hand closed on the bird's tail, and at that instant Montezuma was jerked away. Left with a handful of feathers and a squawk that rang in his ears, he had no idea whether Bustamente had retained possession, or whether Blake was carrying the Roundhead away. It seemed both men had disappeared.

The Colonel sighed. It was too bad that another man's misfortune had brought him his own opportunity. But that was the way of the world. The Texas trail drivers were doing a thorough job of wrecking the Palace Bar, guns were still blazing, and hoarse cries and the scrape and shuffle of furniture swept a bedlam through the place.

The colonel dropped to hands and knees, bit the leg of an unidentified man who trod on his fingers, and made his way unerringly to the bar.

He rose, there, and edged behind it. In one lighted instant, he saw Charlie leaning across the mahogany with a bungstarter in his hand. The colonel carefully selected a bottle of the cheaper grade whiskey, and swung it in the interval of darkness that followed. He stepped over Charlie and reached for the wide cash drawer.

It opened easily. Too easily. The colonel groped inside and touched what felt like a cold, round dollar. At the same instant, another hand brushed against his, and he jerked his arm back in alarm.

But he wasn't quick enough. There was a snap; something closed hard on his wrist, and the unseen man at his side grunted.

IN LONG and varied experience with the law, the colonel had never known handcuffs to close with such force. That experience also had taught him the wisdom of assuming an air of injured dignity.

"What is the reason for this, suh?" he demanded in an aggrieved tone. "What is the idea?"

"I will go," said the other. "I will go without a struggle!"

Somebody bellowed from the doorway; the colonel could see men bulking large against the dimness of the street lights. The bellowing man was ordering the rioters to cease and desist in the name of the law. Obviously, there was some mistake.

The colonel decided to run a bluff. "Come along, then," he urged in the ear of his companion. "Out the back—and hurry!"

The din and clatter were slowly subsiding as they reached the door. Men poured out ahead of them; the rebel yell lifted triumphantly in the alley, and the colonel knew that he was on the heels of the cowboys who had shot up the place.

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He stumbled into the moonlight, and saw that his comrade in irons was the paunchy Mexican, who still had Montezuma tucked under his arm. He saw, too, that the manacles holding them were not handcuffs, but a big, double-spring steel trap.

"Son-of-a-gun, damn!" exploded Bustamente. "Is it not enough to go peacefully to the *juzgado?* Must one be trapped like the wild lobo? Must—" And then he recognized the colonel. "*You, señor?*"

"Yes. No time to get this thing off now. You have a horse?"

"Yonder, *señor.*" He pointed to the cottonwood where the roan was tied, and Colonel Merriwether Bean saw a sorrel tethered there, too. They broke into a run that rattled the chain of the trap; the sheriff's men were piling out the back door, and a bullet whistled over the fugitives' heads.

But the Texans drew the pursuit. They were riding out one end of the alley, and the colonel and Bustamente chose the opposite direction. In a little while the mesquites showed ahead, silver gray under the moon, and the colonel took a ranch road and turned from it to pull rein at his wagon.

Tomorrow he would still have to sell lightning rods. "Any man," he declared, "who would be so highly distrustful of his fellow men as to set a steel trap in his money drawer—"

"*Señor,*" the Mexican interrupted heatedly, "the *cabron* who would do that would cheat at the cards. You, *señor,* saw that ace which the Señor es-Saunders dropped. He would cheat me of my Montezuma—he and that Blake. Why, even in the darkness, Blake grabs for Montezuma as if we were playing *el gallo!*"

"*El gallo?*" inquired the colonel. He motioned to the Mexican and they stepped down from their saddles together. "Let's get this trap loose. What is the game of *el gallo?*"

The paunchy man grunted as he stooped and put a foot on his side of the springs. The colonel followed suit, and the jaws of steel opened. Bustamente flung the trap into the mesquites.

"*El gallo,*" said the Mexican, rubbing his bruised wrist, "is the sport in which the fighting cock is tied to a tree. Two or more *caballeros* race their horses from a given point to reach that tree, *señor,* and it is very exciting.

"Son-of-a-gun, damn, but sometimes the fighting cock is torn to pieces because two *caballeros* grab the bird together and each tries to take it back to the starting line."

"H'm!" muttered the colonel. He found dry wood and placed it on the coals of his campfire, and he managed to put Montezuma's tail feathers, which he had thrust into his coat pocket, on the fire with the wood.

El gallo sounded in the same class with bull fighting. It was clearly his duty to keep Montezuma from such a fate as being torn apart.

"I have spare bedding in the wagon," he said. "You will of course accept what poor hospitality I can offer, and stay here tonight? Allow me to introduce myself, suh. I am Colonel Merriwether Bean."

"But the honor is mine, *señor,*" insisted the other. He swept the big sombrero to the ground. "You have the undying gratitude of Bustamente Luz."

The colonel was eyeing several playing cards that had fallen from the hat. Bustamente Luz had gone Saunders at least three aces better.

THE colonel had intended rising early, at Montezuma's first crow, and making an attempt to convince the nearest rancher that lightning rods were absolutely necessary for the protection of life and property.

But he didn't have a chance. The sun was just topping the prairie when he heard Bustamente Luz cry out from his bed under the wagon, and two horsemen were pounding into camp.

Grabbing his boots, the colonel lifted the wagon tarp and saw Saunders and Blake pull to a stop. They wore determined expressions, and there was a gun strapped around the middle of each. Saunders rested

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his hands on the pommel and glared at Bustamente.

"Well, Mex," he clipped out of his tight mouth, "we found you. I've come for that fighting cock, and I aim to have it."

Blake kneed his horse a little to one side, and cleared his throat. "Art, I helped you find this hombre. But I'm reminding you that four of a kind beat a full house. I won that pot last night, and you grabbed the money. But you ain't taking the bird."

Saunders' eyes flicked over the sharp-faced man. "We ain't ever had an argument, Monte. You want one now?"

"I want Montezuma—that's all!"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" protested the colonel. He climbed stiffly from the wagon. "This is hardly the time or place to quarrel over last night's game. There seems to be some doubt as to who won. Why not call all bets off and shake hands?"

"Like hell!" said Saunders. He shoved a cigar into his face. "I didn't see that four of a kind, and I doubt it was there. I *did* see my full house. Monte, you keep out of this. Now, where's that rooster?"

Bustamente looked helplessly at the colonel. "Have you seen Montezuma today, *señor?*"

"No," said the latter, and this was true because they had fashioned a coop for the Roundhead out of a canned-goods box, and the coop was in the wagon, covered with a grain sack.

Saunders whirled on the colonel as if he intended riding the horse over him. "Don't lie to me," he growled. "I know the rooster's around. Get it. I don't trust either of you. Some sneak thief got caught in my steel trap last night, and I wouldn't be surprised—"

"Suh!" exclaimed the colonel, drawing himself up proudly. "If I were armed, no man could make such an insinuation and escape answering to me for it. But I'm not armed, and I will merely ask you, suh, to leave my camp."

Saunders sneered. "Well, *I'm* armed!" He produced his sixshooter in a swift motion, and pointed it at Bustamente Luz. "Get me that rooster, Mex!"

Bustamente shrugged. Before he could move toward the wagon, however, Monte Blake had drawn his own gun and shoved it into Saunders' ribs.

"Like you say, Art, we ain't ever had an argument," he said smoothly. "And there won't be none now. If you try to claim that bird, I'll let you have it."

Saunders' gun came down, and a light leaped into the colonel's eyes. "Perhaps," he suggested, "you two gentlemen would like to fight a duel. If so—"

"This is plumb damn silly!" Saunders swore. "I won the bird. Do I have to win him twice? If you're anything besides a tinhorn sport, you'll put up the gun, and settle this argument another way. I'll cut the cards for Montezuma."

He holstered his own weapon, and Blake waited until he had taken his hand from it. "It's a deal," Blake said. "Who's got a deck?"

NOBODY had. Bustamente climbed sadly to the wagon tongue and lifted the tarp to murmur something affectionate to the bedraggled Roundhead. Then he turned.

"In my country," he said softly, "the *caballeros* would decide who wins by playing the contest called *el gallo*. But, of course, your horses—" And he shrugged again, this time with great contempt.

"What's wrong with my horse?" flared Saunders.

Monte Blake chuckled. "Everything. This claybank can run rings around him."

"Like hell! I'll race you for money, marbles, or chalk!"

Bustamente Luz rolled a corn-shuck cigarette. "Then, too," he resumed, "the sport of *el gallo* is a dangerous one. Any *caballero* taking part must be a good rider. No, it is too bad, but you would not want to settle the bet like I have said."

"How do you play this game?" Saunders insisted, pressing his sorrel horse forward. The colonel shook his head sadly; after all, it seemed that Montezuma was to run the risk of being torn asunder.

"Why," explained Bustamente, "*el gallo*

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—the fighting cock—is placed in a sack which is left open and tied to a tree. The *caballeros* start from a line and ride like the hell. The first to reach the tree grabs the fighting cock and starts back, and it looks like the race is over.

"But—son-of-a-gun, damn, *señores*—up comes the other *caballero,* also riding like the hell, and he also grabs the fighting cock, and then—"

"Well, then what?" Monte Blake wanted to know.

Bustamente spread his hands. "Sometimes," he said sadly, "the fighting cock is torn in two pieces. But it is a good sport. The caballero first back to the starting line is the winner."

Saunders' reaction was prompt. "Go stake out Montezuma. I'll show Monte whose horse is the fastest."

"But you will kill the Roundhead!" protested the colonel. Then he caught sight of Bustamente's imperturbable eyes, and one of them was closing in a suggestive wink behind the cigarette smoke.

Bustamente had something under his *serape*. He lifted the coop down from the wagon, spoke tenderly to Montezuma, and placed him in the grain sack.

The colonel cleared his throat. "Your horses look mighty well matched, gentlemen," he said. "Yes, suh, this is going to be a powerfully close contest. To make it a little more interesting, may I suggest a little side bet—say a hundred dollars?"

BUSTAMENTE LUZ mounted his own sorrel horse and pointed down through the mesquites. A lone liveoak lifted its darker green above the chaparral, a good half mile distant.

"Montezuma will be under that tree, *señor,*" he said. "Please give me the time to get back so that I may start you."

He reached in the sack and lifted the Roundhead to kiss his beak. "*Adois,* Montezuma—*adios!*"

Then he rode slowly away, disappearing in the mesquites. Monte Blake cleared his throat. "That Mex thinks plenty of the rooster," he said. But Saunders spat into the dust without removing his cigar. "Well," growled the saloon owner, "then he hadn't ought to gamble."

Colonel Merriwether Bean felt the strain of waiting, and eased it by catching up his team and starting to harness them. There was nothing in the future but the distasteful business of selling lightning rods, and his heart was heavy.

Bustamente galloped into sight, empty-handed, and wiped a tear from his eye as he reached camp.

"Everything is ready, *señores,*" he said dismally. "If you, Señor es-Saunders, will lend me your gun—"

"I'm no fool!" snapped Saunders. "I'll keep my gun. You can yell to start this race. And I'll win it, and a hundred bucks on the side."

"Talk's cheap," sneered Blake. "I'm ready."

Bustamente swung down and drew a line in the dirt with his boot heel. He raised his sombrero, caught the horses on the mark, and then whipped the hat down.

"Go!"

They roweled the horses. Saunders' sorrel got off to a head start; but as the two riders struck the mesquites, the claybank was closing up rapidly. In the excitement of watching the race, the colonel forgot Montezuma's probable fate. He tugged at his mustache, and swore.

"Mighty evenly matched, suh, like I said! When it comes to judging horseflesh, fighting cocks and good Bourbon, the Beans always were without equals in the South. But now, suh, I must say goodbye. I am leaving—for other parts."

"Wait, *señor,*" said Bustamente Luz. "I, too, am going!"

"But the Roundhead! You can't leave without knowing whether that cock survived, suh. You—"

"Listen, *señor!*" Bustamente said softly. "Listen but a minute."

FOR a little while the colonel could hear only the diminishing thud of running hoofs and the crashing of the chaparral. Then the two riders struck an open space,

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and from his wagon seat he could see them galloping up beneath the liveoak.

They were still neck and neck; it came to him that each was afraid to get ahead of the other, lest a bullet pierce his back.

Then they were under the dark green branches, and there was a sudden double howl that might have been from anger or pain, or from a mixture of both.

Bustamente Luz smiled mysteriously, and rode a little way into the mesquites. He reappeared with Montezuma, and the colonel saw that the gamecock's legs were tied together.

While he stared, Bustamente cut the string, kissed Montezuma's bill, and replaced the Roundhead in his coop.

"We go now," Bustamente said.

"But I thought—" began the colonel.

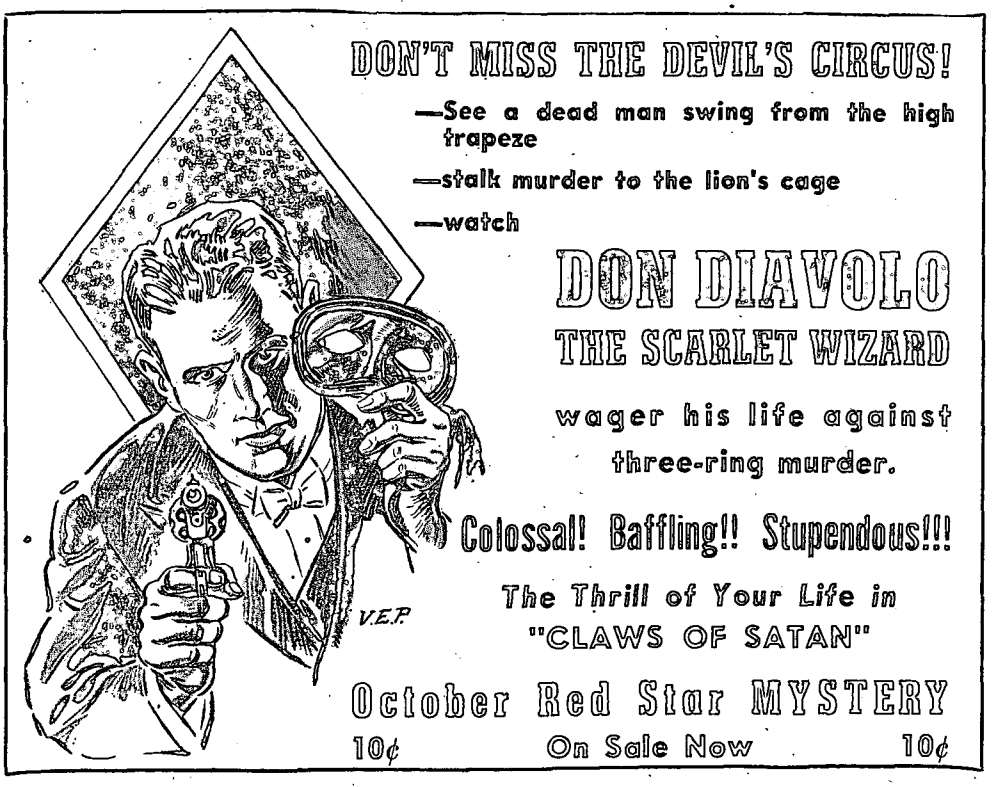
"The steel trap, *señor*," explained the Mexican. "I have placed that steel trap in the open sack, and both the trap and the sack are tied to a high limb of the oak tree with my *riata*. When the Señores es-Saunders and Blake reach for Montezuma, they find what you and I find last night.

"And it will be a little while before they can get loose, because if they leave their horses their feet will not touch the ground. Son-of-a-gun, damn, *señor*, but that steel trap is a Number Four—it will not let go very soon!"

Colonel Merriwether Bean beamed at Bustamente as the latter placed Montezuma's coop in the wagon. They would go on together, the three of them, and the colonel could see how they would do well.

The future looked so bright, he was overcome with an impulsive generosity. He dug into the pocket of his frock coat and pulled out a roll of greenbacks.

"My friend," he said, "here is a hundred dollars which is rightfully yours. It represents half of the stakes those damyankees gave me to hold for them."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Dead of Night

By KURT STEEL

CHAPTER XXXII

IF THAYER IS NOT DEAD . . .

HYER was morose as he came down shortly before eight the next morning and found Dawson standing in the terrace door staring out at a gray sunless morning.

"I've got an idea," Hyer said, as his host turned and greeted him. He followed Dawson to the hall, and said glumly, "It's not much of an idea."

He went to the phone and called the St. Julian and asked for Fred Eller. Presently he said, "Eller? This is Mr. Hyer. . . . Yes. I wonder if you could persuade Miss Thayer to let me borrow you today. . . . Yes, you see I need a driver and my own chap's in the hospital." He pursed his lips and stared at Dawson who was watching him, eyes narrowed. "That's good of you. . . . Yes, I'm at Mr. Dawson's. You can call me here." He gave the number and hung up.

Dawson said, "Hm. I can take you in, of course." His eyebrows lifted, "As a matter of fact, I could take you around myself."

"Thanks," Hyer said. "I knew you could. This other will be better, though—if Marcia isn't too sore at me to let Eller go."

Dawson nodded slowly. "A very shrewd idea. Only what do you expect to do?"

Hyer shrugged. "Keep my eyes open. And my ears open."

Dawson hesitated. "Then you think that—"

"I'm not paid to think," Hyer said irritably. "I'm paid to turn up evidence. There's evidence enough, but it isn't the right kind. Maybe the police will change that. I don't know. The papers have been giving this case a terrific ride, and now that it's struck close home, the New York cops aren't going to be playing tiddledywinks."

Dawson leaned in the doorway and took out a cigarette. Hyer, phone in hand, stared out across the greening lawn.

"Why," Dawson asked resentfully, "when you called that Inspector Turner last night, did you have to do all his reasoning for him?"

"Somebody had to," Hyer snapped.

"You didn't have to be so damned explicit. Pointing out that Rich himself could have dismissed the servants day before yesterday. You know perfectly well he was up there in the mountains all afternoon looking for Nat's station wagon. There must be a dozen garage men who can identify him."

"Yes?" caustically. "How sure are you?"

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"Man, I believe Rich."

Hyer shrugged.

"It's incredible, Hyer. It's beyond all—I suppose you also have a theory as to why the servants were dismissed?"

"Haven't you?"

"No."

Hyer said angrily, "That was probably for my benefit."

"Your—?"

"If I had stayed there in the apartment and gone upstairs to Beryl's room instead of Orson Quick, my guess is *I* wouldn't have got off with a cracked skull."

The phone rang.

Hyer said, "Hello. . . . Yes. . . . Good. That's generous of her. Know where you can hire a car, do you? . . . A small one's all right. . . . In thirty minutes?" He looked questioningly at Dawson, who nodded. "Why, say First Avenue between Forty-ninth and Fiftieth. Headed uptown. . . . Fine. We'll meet you there."

He replaced the phone, and immediately lifted it again, the muscles in his temples flexing. He dialed another number, waited, said, "Dr. Robinson, please," huskily. When he hung up, he shook his head. "Quick hasn't come out of it yet."

HE WAS still morose as Dawson let him out three-quarters of an hour later on First Avenue. Trucks lumbered by and early morning commuters and shoppers streamed southward, threading in and out along the crowded thoroughfare. At the curb just ahead of them stood a small highly polished black sedan. Eller, lean and spruce in his whipcords, was just stepping out.

"He's got good taste in cars, anyway," Dawson murmured grimly. "Happy hunting."

The chauffeur's gaunt, ascetic face was tense, his sunken eyes shadowed as he bowed and opened the door for Hyer.

"You gave me such a good sample the other night," Hyer said amiably, "I've come back for more."

"Thank you, sir." Eller's voice was strained. He got in at the wheel.

"We'll try Owen first," Hyer suggested.

When they stopped in Central Park West, Hyer glanced up and down the sidewalk, was about to step out, when his eyes narrowed and he sank back. A uniform, brass buttons shining, was approaching at a leisurely pace from the far corner.

"Go in," Hyer said rapidly, "and tell Owen I want to see him, that I don't want to come up there if I can help it. Tell him I've got some things to check up on, and see if he'll come along with us. It's a thousand to one he won't." His mouth twisted. "No. Maybe it's a thousand to one he will. Try it."

While he waited, he sat low in a corner of the seat, his hat pulled down. The uniform passed, incurious.

Five minutes went by. Then Hyer grunted and sat up.

Eller had reappeared in the apartment house entrance, and with him, dwarfing his whipcord slenderness, was the broad-shouldered astrologer, his mounded black mane and white teeth displayed to flashing advantage as he doffed his gray Homburg to a passing girl with an Afghan on a leash.

The necromancer approached and an ironical light showed in Hyer's eyes.

But Owen's hearty, "Well, well, our sleuth again," was untouched by the corrosive acid of suspicion, and the readiness with which he got in beside Hyer indicated he had not yet learned of the fate—and identity—of Orson Quick, his erstwhile bodyguard. His boisterousness, however, had no staying power this morning, and they had ridden but a block or two when he said quietly, "Beryl's death shook me, Hyer. It shook all of us, I guess. Mrs. Thayer was a vital woman, you know."

Hyer said, "She was." He looked at the big man.

Owen's swarthy face was somber. "Got something in mind, have you?"

"Something," Hyer said. "Had breakfast yet?"

"That," Owen said, with an instant's return of his normal heartiness, "is a splendid idea." His face tightened again into stiff lines. A moment later, he said quiet-

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ly, "You're doing me a favor, Hyer. I'd hated like hell facing a day of routine. It got through to me last night."

THEY had a morose, moody breakfast in a Schrafft's, and for a time as they sat over their coffee Owen talked, quietly, haltingly, with none of his earlier bombast, of Rich's horoscope—described the Venus-Jupiter opposition in it, the Mars-Saturn aspect, others. Hyer, watching him, was struck by the man's relaxed, nerveless manner, and not until he was drinking his second cup of coffee did it come to him with a start that Owen might be acting. Annoyed, he sought to attend pointedly to the astrologer's recital, but again the vision of Orson in a silent hospital room intruded.

At last Owen fell silent. Suddenly he said, "I say, Hyer, I can't do any work today. What say we have a go at those trainmen the police turned up? The ones who think they saw Thayer on the train into New York that Tuesday morning."

Hyer looked up, studied the astrologer's eyes without success. He shrugged. But he did not at once reject the idea, and after a time he crushed out his cigarette. "All right."

Eller, thin-lipped, silent, was waiting for them. He nodded, and without a word started northward at Hyer's direction.

They spent more than six hours running down and interviewing the porter and brakeman who, according to the papers, had seen Mr. Thayer on the train from Utica that afternoon, now ten days since. Both were a little less certain today. The pullman conductor and train conductor were out of the city and unavailable. At intervals Hyer called the hospital. By two o'clock the reports had become a trifle more encouraging. Quick, however, was still unconscious.

"If anything happens to that kid," Hyer muttered as he turned from the phone, and his voice had a grating quality. He rejoined Owen, said, "Well, we haven't got very far."

They were walking along a street in Harlem from the rooming house where they had talked to the pullman porter. Now it began to drizzle, and they stepped into a doorway. Hyer signaled to Eller, who was waiting down the block, and when the sedan drew up, the two men ran across the sidewalk, edged between parked cars, and jumped in.

"Where next?" Owen asked. Suddenly his black eyes flashed, and he added, "You haven't suggested I consult the stars, Hyer."

Hyer shook his head. He blinked and looked at the astrologer. "No, I hadn't suggested that."

Owen threw back his head and laughed loudly. He slapped Hyer's knee. "I appreciate that, old man. You're an intelligent sleuth, after all, aren't you?"

"No," Hyer said. "But sometimes I'm lucky."

Owen's laughter tapered off.

There was a moment of silence. Eller stared straight ahead.

Hyer, who had slumped back in a corner, leaned forward, said, "Drive down through the park. Take your time." He settled back, murmured, "I want to think. Maybe I'll want to think out loud."

Owen glanced at him, but said nothing.

AS THEY entered the park, the drizzle became a freshet of spring rain that blotted out the middle distance and drummed lustily on the roof of the cab. The torrent slackened almost at once and was followed by a faint roll of thunder. Across the high apartment buildings westward, a rift of blue widened.

"There's one thing," Hyer said slowly, "that bothers me."

Owen waited. Presently he said, "What, Hyer?"

"When the train Thayer should have been on got to Grand Central that Tuesday night, there was a johnny there waiting to serve papers on him."

Owen said, "Now, really?"

Hyer looked at Eller. The chauffeur's back was rigid. They were silent for a time.

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The rain ceased. Hyer rolled his window down. The washed air had a clean urban fragrance of green foliage and drenched asphalt. Forsythia was verdant against the darker undergrowth, in the distance a tulip bed blazed briefly and was gone behind a massive outcrop. Under the magnolia and dogwood trees lay carpets of petals, scattered in final ruin by the shower.

At last Owen said slowly, "What if Thayer—?" He met Hyer's eyes and stopped.

"What if Thayer what?"

Owen seemed reluctant to continue. He looked out the window, and his broad shoulders moved. "It sounds balmy enough."

"Go on. The whole thing's balmy."

"Well, what if Thayer *did* get back to town that night? What if he's been hiding—say, in the apartment itself?"

"Where would he hide?" Hyer demanded.

Owen shrugged. He was still staring out, his swarthy face averted. "God knows."

"Balmy," Hyer said, "is no word for it."

The astrologer seemed to struggle for a moment. "You didn't know him the way I did, Hyer," he said in a low voice.

"Yes?"

"He had a crazy streak, Hyer." Owen turned, met Hyer's eyes again, but this time his glance did not shift. "I know," his voice rising, "they say I'm responsible for it. But I'm not, Hyer. By the Lord, I'm not. He was that way when I first met him. He had this crazy streak. But crazy, I mean. Oh, it was harmless enough at first."

The astrologer's mouth twisted and he flushed. "But Beryl got mad at me and began working on him," bitterly. "After that, I didn't know what day he'd cook up some lunatic scheme and wreck my reputation. Wreck his business, for that matter. Which would come to the same thing, since I'd get credit for it. His liquidating of Rich's assets—that was Beryl's idea. She could do anything she wanted with him.

"She'd about persuaded him they ought to go to Tibet—I mean it," harshly, when Hyer blinked. "She had some insane notion they'd get into a lamasery. The first step was to get out of the publishing business, close up shop—"

"And your observatory?"

Owen nodded grimly.

"All right. And my observatory, then. That's what—" Owen broke off. He hesitated a moment, his eyes narrowing. Then he blew out his breath sharply and moved his hand. "You might as well know; she's dead. It doesn't make any difference, now. That's what we went up to Manitou for, Thayer and I." There was a sharp challenging gleam in the astrologer's eyes as he held Hyer's glance.

"This business about young Lanning and Marcia was only a footnote. The main thing was that Thayer had decided to go through with Beryl's scheme. I talked to him all day—all evening. I talked him out of it," sharply. "I know I had. He agreed to forget the whole thing. We shook hands. He thanked me for bringing him to his senses. That was a little before eleven. He went out for a walk." Owen stopped and looked out the window. "He was pretty sore at Beryl by that time.

"So what if he actually came back to New York—to drop out of sight? Those telephone calls, the dismissal of the servants—I heard about that last night," quickly. "What if he's still at large, Hyer? He's a maniac, then, pure and simple." Owen stopped, shrugged. "No. It's too much like something out of the Grand Guignol."

Hyer asked absently, "Out of what?" When Owen did not respond, he said, "Hollywood. Pure Hollywood. No, it won't stand up."

CHAPTER XXXIII

SHIFTING STARS

AFTER a silence, Hyer said, "There's the pattern, though."

"What pattern?"

"There's one thing that all the cases in this chain have in common. Planted evidence. Sandlund's body planted on me.

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Rich planted in Washington. Dawson's car planted up at Manitou Lake—"

"Those checks planted on me," Owen broke in angrily. "I get it. I hadn't seen it before." He looked hard at Hyer.

Hyer nodded. "Those are only a few. Think back and you'll remember a lot of others. This telephone call to the law firm to have a process server waiting for Thayer at Grand Central Tuesday night—was one of the earliest and one of the cleverest, wasn't it?" His bland face was guileless as he turned to the astrologer.

Owen flushed. "I don't know. Was it?"

"The point," Hyer said slowly, "was for a man to be at Grand Central all right when the train came in—but it wasn't so he'd *meet* Thayer. It was so he *wouldn't* meet Thayer. To prove Thayer *didn't* get back to New York."

"What the devil are you—? First you seem to think he was on the train, then that he didn't come to New York at all."

"No, I didn't say that. You're making the inference everybody else was supposed to. Grand Central," Hyer went on patiently, "isn't the only place in New York where a man can get off a through train from the north."

Owen's eyes narrowed. "Harmon?"

Hyer nodded. "Or the Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street Station. If he got off there, nobody would notice because the last thing in the world anybody notices is who gets off at Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street on a train coming into the city."

Owen said, "I'll be damned," softly.

Hyer saw the chauffeur stiffen.

"Well," Owen said a few moments later, "then I suppose I can't help you—any more, Hyer?"

Hyer said moodily, "I suppose not."

The astrologer laughed. "But you've helped me no end, you know. Feel a different man. I swear I do. I'll get off at Fifty-ninth, then, Hyer."

Hyer said, "Suit yourself."

As they stopped, Owen said. "I'll be seeing you again?" and his eyebrows rose.

"You'll be seeing me again."

The astrologer started to speak, laughed instead, and opened the door. His old buoyancy had come back. He said, "Thanks a lot, Eller, old man."

The chauffeur stared stonily ahead.

"Drop by for a drink, Hyer. Any time at all."

Hyer said, "Thanks."

Owen got out, removed his hat with a sweeping hand, showed his teeth. "Au 'voir, then."

As they drove on, Eller said, "Where to now, sir?" Then, jerkily over his shoulder, "You learned nothing at all from Mr. Owen?"

Hyer said, "No."

"I am sure that if *you* did not, sir—" Eller's pale lips compressed, and he turned to stare ahead again.

"We'll drop in at the St. Julian," Hyer said. "See how the rest of them are."

WHEN they stopped in front of the hotel, Hyer looked up and down the sidewalk cautiously. He said, "I want to phone the hospital again anyway," and his manner was preoccupied.

The door to Marcia's and Augusta's suite was opened to them by Regan, the Thayer butler. His round symmetrical face and round symmetrical body inclined toward them. He said, "Will you come in, sir?"

Hyer said, "What are you doing here?"

Regan bowed him into the room. "I have a second cousin, sir, who is with the police. Through him I learned that Miss Thayer was stopping here. I came to see if I might be of service. She seemed—glad to see me, sir." He coughed as Hyer looked at him curiously. "Miss Thayer and Miss Warren are in the other room, sir."

Dawson was standing by the window. He said, "Any luck?"

Hyer shook his head. "Managed to get wet—and insulted. That's all."

At that moment Augusta Warren came through a door at the other side of the room. Her black-browed look informed Hyer as clearly as might her deep bass voice that Marcia had not spared him when she told Augusta the part he had played

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in Rich's questioning by the police early that morning.

Dawson went to Augusta.

Hyer crossed the room, still preoccupied, and picked up the phone. He called the hospital, and in a hoarse voice asked after Quick for the seventh time that day. When he put the phone down, his hand trembled, and a vast relief showed in his weary face. Quick was conscious at last. There was, an interne had assured Hyer, little danger now.

Eller waited at the door. There was a nervousness in his manner, and now a flush burned in his gaunt face. He said quietly, "Mr. Hyer, I wonder if I might have a word with you."

Hyer, his amiable self once more, stepped out to the corridor.

Eller followed him. When he had closed the door, the chauffeur said stiffly, "I could not help overhearing sir, just now. I am sorry, of course, for what happened to your young man, Mr. Hyer, but—"

"But what?"

"Well," the chauffeur said, and his embarrassment was suddenly touched with a thin, sharp truculence, "you can hardly suspect me of *that*, Mr. Hyer."

The corners of Hyer's mouth rose. He said, "No, I guess that's right, Eller. You're—" His lips closed over the rest of the sentence, his smile lost its spontaneity.

Standing at a turn in the corridor, some thirty feet away, was an excessively thin man in a derby hat and a belted topcoat. He leveled a long bony forefinger at Hyer, folded it slowly, and motioned with his thumb over his shoulder.

There are many gestures native to the thumb, most of them on the less amicable side. They range from crass and unmistakable vilification through a descending and nicely graded scale of insult, odium, and disparagement. Detective Slade's gesture conveyed its message with a simple, homely economy. A man who says no more than "Come here," if his listener be accomplished in the more subtle ways of communication, need not accompany his words by the malevolent scowl, the leveled gun, or brandished club to make his command imperative.

Hyer knew when he was wanted.

HE GLANCED back along the corridor. There was another turning, but the L leading from it would be blind. The stairs were by the elevator bank, and metween him and the elevators stood the waiting Slade. The last thing in the world that Hyer wanted at that moment was a protracted session with inquisitive and long-winded police. Nothing, he knew, would delight Turner more than to book him on suspicion, and it was highly probable that Turner's own interest in him had, by this time, been augmented by the whetted curiosity of the state troopers at Manitou Lake.

To Eller, Hyer murmured, "Come back this way with me." He took the puzzled chauffeur by the arm, turned and started along the corridor away from Slade.

"Hank," the thin man called, and there was reproach in his tone, "you're just putting yourself and me to a lot of unnecessary trouble. You know that's a dead end. I ain't going to get tired of parking here."

Over his shoulder, Hyer said, "Be with you in a minute, Slim." Still with his hand under Eller's arm, he turned into the transverse corridor and disappeared from Slade's view.

Ninety seconds later Eller reappeared, alone. He walked past Slade, eyed him curiously and rang for an elevator. His drawn, sallow face was flushed, his eyes unusually bright. Just as the elevator door opened, he turned and said distinctly to Slade, "Hyer is waiting for you around the corner there. He probably needs a doctor."

The thin one looked startled, took a step toward Eller. Then he caught himself and leered. He said, "Oh sure. He maybe needs an ambulance and one of those rubber-tired stretchers. And you think I'm going to chase you downstairs and get one, do you? *Gawan.* Beat it."

Eller said, "I told you," calmly, and stepped into the car. He alighted at the main floor, went quickly out the nearest

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side exit, and walked to a waiting taxicab just beyond the restricted space in front of the door.

On the twelfth floor, Slade leaned against the wall a few moment longer, while a satisfied grin dawned, glowed for a time, and gradually faded. He straightened, glanced back at the elevator bank once, and then sauntered down the corridor. When he reached the turn, he brought up with a start. Then he was running forward toward Hyer who was inching his way along supported by the wall.

"Knifed me," Hyer said in a choking whisper. His chin was down hard against his left shoulder, and to his throat and neck on that side he held a handkerchief. The handkerchief was being dyed red, and even as Slade stared, the red seeped through and dripped to the floor. "Get me a doctor, Slim," Hyer pleaded.

Slade said, "Sure, Hank," anxiously, and with his arm about Hyer, helped the stricken man as he limped weakly down the corridor, past the door to Marcia's suite, around the corner toward the elevators. Then, within a few yards of the grilled doors, Hyer slumped to the floor with a gurgle.

"Call—" Hyer gasped. "Room twelve-fifteen. . . . Phone there. . . . Miss Thayer. . . ."

"You're going to be okay, Hank," Slade said, kneeling beside him. He rose and ran back around the corner.

HYER waited until he heard Slade's vigorous rapping at Marcia's door. Then in an instant he was on his feet, moving swiftly to the elevators, Chase Remsen's oversize fountain pen, which had been concealed under his left wrist, dripping red dots across the rug. Hank thanked his stars he'd forgotten to hand it back to his friend last night.

He glanced at the indicators, saw that the second car had passed the twelfth floor an instant before, and in front of its door emptied a trickle of red ink from the pen.

He leaped for the stairs and an instant later was running down them three steps at a time.

On the third floor he went briskly into the deserted ballroom lavatory, glanced in the mirror, saw that the thick handkerchief had not soaked through, straightened his unmarked collar, went out, let himself through a fire door, and descended to the side street by a back stairway.

At a telephone booth in a neighboring stationary store he called the St. Julian, asked for Marcia's room by number, chuckled when told the line was busy, and without impatience said, "I'll wait."

He took three nickels from his pocket and lined them up on the shelf under the phone. At the end of three minutes he deposited one of the nickels and continued to wait, his expression bland, untroubled.

At length he said, "Thanks," and then, "May I speak to Miss Marcia Thayer, please." He frowned, said quickly, "How long ago did she leave?" hung up, and hurried out to the street.

Casting a wary glance each way, he saw no sign of Slade, and ran toward the side exit from the St. Julian lobby.

Fred Eller, seeing him coming, stepped out of a cab in which he was waiting.

Hyer jumped in. Eller started to get in, but Hyer stopped him. "Go up to the corner," Hyer said swiftly. "Watch for Miss Thayer. She'll be coming out the main entrance probably. If she comes out and takes a cab, high-sign me. If she comes out this door, I'll pick you up as I go by. Stand where you can see both ways. Run along."

Eller hurried away.

Hyer glanced over his shoulder, and through the cab window saw a white-topped radio car approaching slowly, its operator and recorder both examining parked cars and sidewalks as they rolled along.

Hyer leaned forward, and was about to instruct his driver to move on, when his eyes crinkled.

Coming out the side door of the St. Julian was Slade, his nemesis of the derby hat and the belted top coat.

To have slipped out of the cab on the side away from Slade would have dropped

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him directly in the path of the leisurely radio car, whose occupants, instinct warned Hyer, were already looking for him at Slade's telephoned behest.

To step to the sidewalk would be to invite Slade's eager and immediate attention. Yet to remain where he was, perched narrowly between the incurving horns of his dilemma, would be no less ruinous, he saw, for as the radio car approached inexorably abaft, Slade, seeing the parked taxi, turned and bore down upon it from the opposite quarter.

At that instant the final turn of the screw was given by Eller fifty yards away at the corner. He took out his handkerchief and blew his nose.

Hyer groaned.

THEN his eyes narrowed and a spark of hope leaped alive in them. In the moment his gaze had been deflected from Slade to Eller, the thin man in the derby had caught sight of the police car and stepped out to signal it. The white-topped coupé rolled harmlessly past Hyer's taxi and swung to the curb as Slade backed up awaiting it.

Hyer saw Slade ask a question, saw one of the officers in the car nod. He saw no more, for his casual, "All right, buddy, let's go," had set the cab in motion, and an instant later they had passed the official trio who were now engaged in earnest conversation.

As Eller got in at the corner, he said rapidly, "They're in that bright yellow cab just starting up. Miss Thayer, Mr. Dawson, and Miss Warren."

Hyer looked at the yellow taxi moving away from in front of the St. Julian marquee, and gnawed his lower lip.

The lights had changed but a moment before, and though his driver signaled hopefully for a right turn, the traffic officer stared at them scornfully.

Hyer looked back. Slade and the police car were hidden. His nostrils twitched. He said. "Come on," and in one smooth, uninterrupted motion he had taken a bill from his pocket, thrust it through to their driver, opened the door, stepped out, and was running diagonally across the sidewalk to another cab waiting at the avenue curb, headed south down the open channel of green lights.

The bright yellow taxi was still visible, their new driver a man who knew his business. After they had overcome its original lead, they were never more than fifty yards behind the leading cab. But as it bored deeper and deeper into Manhattan, Hyer grew uneasy. By the time they were whisking past Wanamaker's and heading down Lafayette Street, his round face wore a bemused expression. And when the taxi in front stopped before a building with *District Attorney* emblazoned on its long windows, he said, "Oh-oh."

CHAPTER XXXIV

VENUS IN TRANSIT

MARCIA and Dawson had alighted, the girl running across the walk to a door, Dawson leaning back into the cab to say something before he hurried after her.

Hyer sat back in his corner and drew a breath. Relaxing, he took out his cigarette case and offered it to Eller.

Ten minutes passed. Then Marcia and Dawson reappeared, Rich Lanning walking between them.

Eller said, "Why, there's Mr. Lanning. I thought the police— That is, I thought he was—" As he met Hyer's eyes, he flushed.

Hyer saw Augusta Warren surge out of the yellow taxi and embrace Rich, who still wore his timberjack garb and a by now quite formidable growth of beard. There was a brief conference, and Augusta climbed back into the cab.

Hyer saw Marcia shake her head swiftly at some suggestion of Dawson's. She looked back along the street, saw Hyer's cab at the curb, and pointed. Dawson patted her shoulder, shook hands with Rich, and stepped into the cab where Augusta was waiting.

Marcia nodded, smiled, laughed. Rich shut the door behind Dawson.

Then the young man and girl were ap-

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proaching, her arm in his, oblivious to the gallery they attracted.

Eller started to open the door. Hyer jerked him back, said, "Sit still."

So intent were Rich and Marcia on each other, that not until the driver had opened the door at Hyer's order, and they were about to step into the cab, did they see its two occupants.

Rich said, "Hello."

Marcia, after a swift glance of surprise, merely stared at Hyer. Her eyes darkened.

Hyer said, "Get in."

"Thank you," she said stiffly, "we'll find another—"

"Get in!" testily. Then to Rich. "Throw her in."

Rich said, "Right," and before the girl could do more than gasp, he had lifted her bodily and sat her in the seat between Hyer and Eller. Then, with flawless *sang froid,* Rich waved to the cab waiting up the street and stepped in as Eller moved to the auxiliary seat to make room for him.

"Turn around," Hyer said to the driver, "fast. Keep ahead of that yellow cab when they come after us." He looked at the fuming girl beside him, said, "Now isn't this nice and homey?"

She was not to be beguiled. She said, "You've an unspeakable nerve."

Hyer chuckled. "Why did they let you go?" he asked Rich. "Dawson get busy again with his official connections?"

Rich shook his head. "No. Albert Jocelyn, Mr. Thayer's lawyer, this time."

"I called Jocelyn," Marcia said shortly.

Hyer chuckled again, "Did you tell Jocelyn I'd turned out to be a heel?"

She said, "You're clairvoyant," and though she struggled against his infectious good humor, the corner of her mouth twitched suddenly.

Hyer said, "There's a city detective by the name of Slade has the same opinion."

Marcia's eyes widened. She said impulsively, "What *did* happen to you? That man came running into the room and said you'd been—" She stopped and looked at Eller. "Eller," she cried. "He said you had stabbed Mr. Hyer."

Eller's thin face pinked. He coughed.

Hyer said, "Eller is a first-class actor."

The chauffeur gave him a sidelong glance and turned to stare ahead without speaking.

"But what did happen?" Marcia demanded.

Hyer said, "That can wait. Quick woke up with nothing worse than a bad headache."

MARCIA caught her breath. Hyer saw that Rich had gripped her hand, saw the young man swallow. No one spoke for a moment. Then Rich touched lips with his tongue and smiled. He said, "Thank God," softly.

"Where were you people going?" Hyer asked.

Rich said, "Out to suburbia. I'm a little fed up on the roiling bustle of the metropolis. I suggested that we all go out to Pierre's and lick our wounds."

Hyer said, "Not a bad idea. I could do with a little rural calm myself right now."

Marcia, her voice strained, said, "Tell him the rest, Rich, what you were just telling me."

Rich looked at Eller's unresponsive profile, then at Hyer. He said softly, "I had a chance to think things over today rather carefully. It occurred to me that perhaps Mr. Thayer did get to New York that Tuesday night, that the process server in Grand Central was there as a blind, to prove that he didn't come—that actually he got off at the Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street Station and took a cab somewhere."

"Cab!" Hyer said sharply. "My God." His round bland face was blank. He repeated, "My God!"

Marcia said, "What's the matter?"

"Me," Hyer said resentfully. "I've been muscle-bound in the head. The taxicab," he went on, "is the most useful institution since the invention of the axe. And taxicab companies have a little gadget that's put the bee on more criminals than all the lie detectors in Chicago."

She said, "Gadget?" sharply.

"Report card. Every hackman has to

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carry a report card and fill in the time and place he picks up a fare and the time and place he drops it. About half the time they do. Particularly if it's a long haul and good pay. If your father got off at the Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street Station Tuesday night, he probably took a cab, as Rich says. We know he didn't go to Gracie Square, so that may mean he went downtown to a hotel—or somewhere else. Maybe he drove around a while. If he was upset, maybe he had trouble making up his mind. Anyway, it won't hurt to look over a crop of report cards. We've got the exact time because it will be easy to find out when the train made that stop. We've got the exact place. What more could we want?"

They waited for a light and the silence was broken only by the ticking of the meter.

Hyer looked back. The yellow cab was drawing up behind them. "Eller and I are getting out," he said rapidly. "Never mind if Augusta does see us now. You two go on. You can say you put me off with some kind of a story. I'll get in touch with you." He patted Marcia's knee, said, "Nice going, Lanning," opened the door, and was on the point of stepping out when he winced and hesitated.

Directly across the sidewalk stood a policeman gossiping idly with a shopkeeper.

Hyer muttered something and stepped out. Eller followed. Law looked at them incuriously and went on talking to commerce.

Hyer straightened his shoulders, looked back, waved his hand to the taxi that bore Augusta and Dawson. Then, taking Eller's arm, he walked the chauffeur briskly away and around the corner.

CHAPTER XXXV

VENUS IN PERIL

AT DUSK, no word had come from Hyer. Rich had finally proposed that they go down to the Inn for dinner, and had gone upstairs to make himself presentable by urban standards.

"Meanwhile," Augusta growled, "we starve. How's your icebox, Pierre?"

"Some tongue," Dawson said doubtfully. "Part of a ham—"

"Fine." Augusta rose. "Come on, Marcia."

Marcia said absently, "How can you think of food?"

"Think of food any time you want to," briskly, "given a appetite. Never mind, Pierre, you'd only be in the way. Keep out." She grumbled her way into the house.

Dawson and Marcia continued to sit on the terrace in the mild May evening.

Dawson chuckled. "When Gussie makes up her mind to something, you give in or else. If I went after her just now, she'd chase me out of my own kitchen with a cleaver."

Marcia's tired mind caught and clung to the image stubbornly, and for a moment reality wavered before the vivid picture of Augusta waving a cleaver in the kitchen door. Then she laughed guiltily and lay back against the cushions of the swing. Fatigue ached in her eyes and was like a slow dry surf in her ears.

Stealthily in the silence, dread re-awoke within her. She opened her eyes. Darkness was not yet complete. There was in the hushed twilight a soft luminous tone that gave near objects a flat two-dimensional quality and made the street and the shadowed houses opposite uneasy and dreamlike.

Marcia felt herself growing drowsy. She had slept scarcely at all for two nights. But just before her hold on wakefulness slipped utterly, she saw again the sharp-edged, comic vision of Augusta's hearty arm upraised and the shining cleaver.

With a start she sat up. To her buzzing ears it seemed that the house was oddly quiet, and once more, with a flicker of chill, she wondered where Hyer could be, wondered why no word of Clearse Owen had reached them since his return to the city the morning before. For he had reached the city. His plane was in its hangar, Hyer had assured them.

"I'm getting hungry, too," Dawson was saying. "Rich is taking an unconscionable time for a bath and a shave."

"I'll go hurry him," Marcia said. She

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went into the house, ran up the stairs. She stopped, her heart pounding, listened. For a moment there was no sound. Then she heard water splash and ran to the closed bathroom door. "Rich, dear," she called.

The splashing within stopped. Rich's voice came, muffled as though he spoke through a towel. "Coming."

She said, "We're famished," and gave a short artificial laugh.

Having spoken to him, she felt reassured. The foreboding which had seized her on the terrace passed like a lifting fog.

THE door across the hall was ajar, and in the room she saw a bed. Fatigue and sleeplessness were suddenly like a high fever in her. Moving automatically, she went into the room toward the bed. With an effort, her drugged thoughts formed a sequence: "I'll lie down until Rich—" The rest hung suspended.

She had stopped stock still. Something was plucking insistently at her consciousness, a faint, elusive, terrible clue. Her smarting eyes flew wide, staring, blinded by the semi-darkness into which she had stumbled.

She waited, sought to single out and grasp the teasing, haunting thing that was somewhere in the whirling confusion of her senses.

Then her giddiness vanished and she was cool, tense, purposeful. Her nostrils quivered, and she drew quick explorative breaths. But she could not recapture the faint sharp scent which had assailed her the moment she entered the room, a scent recalling peat smoke, bracken, the thin cold fragrance of fog over clover—a scent that was as indelibly a part of her memory of her father as were the contours of his profile, his quiet courtly voice.

She looked about her, saw a closet door, went toward it on tiptoe.

She had all but reached the door when she was suddenly seized in a strong ruthless grasp, her head jerked back while a heavy hand covered her mouth.

She tried to scream for Rich and could only choke under the gagging hand, tried to struggle, but though desperation trebled her strength, she was helpless.

Then a sound came to her and she stopped struggling. Her captor, too, had stiffened.

In front of the house a car's brakes had squealed. There were men's voices on the terrace, men's steps.

Then a blow descended on the back of her head and she was oblivious to the voices and the footsteps—just as she was oblivious to the room in which she had slumped to the floor.

WHEN she opened her eyes, Rich was bending over her, stroking her hair gently.

Her head ached and her mouth was dry. She tried to sit up, and as memory came back to her she tried to gasp out what happened. But the words she was struggling for, died in her throat.

She stared fixedly over Rich's supporting arm at the men in the living room, and then looked bewildered up at Rich.

He said, "There, darling," and tried to force her back to the couch.

But the shock had revived her and she pushed him away to sit up and cry hoarsely, *"Pierre!"*

In the doorway Dawson turned. His big normally ruddy face was white and strained. He made a move as if he would come to her, but he did not come. Beside him was the thin man in the derby and belted topcoat. The thin man preferred to go through the door and Dawson perforce had to go with him, for they were joined at the wrist.

"Pierre," Marcia whispered. "It was—Pierre? But how—?"

She saw Hyer talking to Inspector Turner. Near them stood a short near-sighted uncomfortable man whose nervous hands twisted a cap with a hackman's badge on it.

Rich compelled her gently to lie back. He said, "Hyer found the cab-driver, dear, that brought your father from the Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street Station—here."

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"But what—?"

"When Hyer and the others got here just now, Pierre was leaving by the back door. In the room, where we found you," Rich continued softly, "we found—"

"Dad's clothing," she gasped.

Rich tried to force her back. "How did you know, dear?"

She said, "But where is—?"

Rich's arm was strong and reassuring about her shoulders, his fingers light on her lips.

She heard the sound. A deliberate, muffled thump. Then another.

Her lips moved. "The—cellar?"

Rich's mouth tightened. His gray eyes smiled at her. "Better rest, sweet."

Then she heard the thump-thump more clearly, and straining her ears she could hear men talking directly below the room.

For the first time in her determined, self-reliant life she fainted.

CHAPTER XXXVI

FRUITS OF INIQUITY

"YES," Hyer said, as they rode city-ward through the warm Spring night, "Dawson drove his car up to the camp himself. After it occurred to him he could throw the blame on Rich through that phone call, that he had made himself and later claimed to know nothing about, cancelling the order to wash the car. He took a long chance on being caught away from home that night, but risked it. I guessed from what he said later that he was lying when he said he had left Forest Hills on Tuesday morning to go to Albany. He was there Monday night."

Marcia, leaning in the curve of Rich's arm, looked at Hyer as their taxi stopped for a light. She said, "How did you know?"

"He told us that when he didn't see the car on Tuesday morning, he thought they were late with it from the garage and walked to the subway station to catch the train to Albany. Well, if he had really thought that, he'd have phoned the garage. Under any circumstances, it's a hundred-to-one he wouldn't have walked to the subway. He'd have called a taxi. But he didn't dare say that, of course. Taxis around Forest Hills are few enough they could be checked.

"So he had really driven up to Manitou Lake Monday night after you left him, dumped the car, and walked across country to get on the down-train at Thendara. Meanwhile, your father, being pretty upset over what Owen told him, had driven out in the station wagon to calm himself down. Maybe he lost track of time, maybe he actually did want to avoid you, Lanning. You were due at the Big Moose station Tuesday morning, you know. But anyway, he also got on the train at Thendara rather than Big Moose.

"That must have been a surprise to Dawson, who hadn't expected him until Big Moose. He'd have been a lot more surprised if he'd known that Sandlund and Jean were in the next coach and that they had seen Pierre and your father both get on. With the season up there still dead, though, Dawson stood a pretty good chance of not being recognized, and it was a chance worth taking.

"He got a bedroom for both of them on the North Shore Limited, and managed to keep your father out of sight. He got off alone at Albany, made a show of having come in off the street looking for Mr. Thayer. He even had him paged to make sure there'd be adequate evidence."

"And it was he who called the law firm about the process server?" Rich asked.

Hyer nodded. "To make sure there would be plenty of proof that Mr. Thayer didn't get to New York. He'd somehow persuaded him to leave the train at the uptown station and go on to Forest Hills, where he met him a couple of hours later—"

"And *killed* him," Marcia whispered. Her clenched hand beat the seat. *"But why?"*

Hyer looked at her. "You don't know?"

She shook her head, dazed.

"Beryl," Hyer said slowly, "had persuaded your father to pull out of Thayer-Dawson—and go to Tibet. Wait a minute," quickly. "You knew her. You know how she was. Well, she had this bee in her head,

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and she'd persuaded your father to go through with it. Maybe Owen helped, I don't know. He says he was against it, but you can't tell. Anyway, it came to a head the day before, and Thayer agreed to do what Beryl wanted him to do.

"NOW if he'd taken his money out of the firm, that would have left Dawson high and dry, because Dawson couldn't possibly have bought your father's controlling interest, and if he brought new capital in, he'd have had a lot of trouble running it. It was a pretty sure bet that the business would have slipped right out from beneath Dawson, under those circumstances. But with your father out of the way—and a couple of hundred thousand dollars he'd get from Rich's estate to work with—" Hyer turned his hand.

"Anyway, that night after it was over," Hyer continued briskly, "he called you, Lanning, made the date with you for Washington Thursday afternoon. It had to be Thursday because he knew you couldn't get there Wednesday afternoon on such short notice. So Wednesday he managed to keep out of Beryl's way, actually went to New Haven to avoid having to talk to her.

"Thursday morning he forged the checks himself from a pair he had already laid out from vouchers to Owen. If anybody discovered the forgery, Owen would be blamed. He was a little too sure," Hyer said softly, "that those two checks of Owen's would turn up."

"But why did I have to be in Washington?" Rich asked.

"To confuse things a little further. Maybe he actually thought he could throw suspicion on you. By that time the passion for spinning a web had got hold of him.

"So he flew to Washington, got the money himself, went back to the post office thirty minutes later, and inquired if the money had been collected, gambling on a clerk's not recognizing him.

"By the following Monday when I showed up, the fever for manufacturing evidence was overpowering and right at the start he outdid himself just a little. The shot through his window. He fired it himself with a gun he'd brought down from the Lodge the week before. And when it turned out to be his own gun, he owned up, of course, knowing that would throw us off."

"He fired the shot *himself?*" Marcia gasped.

Hyer nodded. "I knew it that night. He had said he was sitting at his desk working when the shot was fired. But," Hyer paused, "there was a sliver of glass from the broken window squarely in the center of his seat cushion. So he couldn't have been sitting down when the shot was fired. Maybe he saw me pick the glass up, I don't know. But he'd begun to get suspicious of me. Sandlund's arrival gave him a shock. He made the Swede—who wasn't too bright—say enough to give away what he knew without realizing it, and he was ready to add me to the frameups he was handing out. He had to put Sandlund out of commission before Sandlund could tell anybody what he had seen on the train.

"So he decoyed Sandlund to my house—possibly came along with him. He was lucky enough to find me away from home, and left Sandlund's body on my doorstep.

"That call to you, supposedly from your father that night," Hyer said to Marcia, "was another giveaway after a manner of speaking. That is, it came from somebody who didn't know beans about astrology, so it couldn't have been your father.

"By then I'd begun to get the hang of the pattern. That second call to you was pure exhibitionism. So was the list of Washington names he pretended somebody had planted in his wallet. Smart, using the pattern of plants on himself like that, though the story about the pocket-picking and the lost wallet was pretty thin.

"The next morning things were beginning to tighten up on him. Beryl learned something—maybe Jean called on her before he called on Dawson with his blackmail idea. He put Jean off, gave him a down payment—remember the bills in Jean's pocket—fixed him a poisoned sandwich."

"But the gun Beryl was shot with?" Marcia put in.

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"He'd managed to get that Tuesday morning before she started up to Manitou."

"How do you know?"

"The way you know two and two are four. The fact that he was rain-soaked when he came into Augusta's cottage that night after you had taken me out of my tailspin was another signboard. He shouldn't have been soaked the way he was if he'd merely run from his car to her kitchen door. No, he had come in foot earlier, looking for Beryl—looking for me, too, probably.

"He had slipped into the house, seen her go into my room, seen me stagger out. That had given him his chance to throw some more framing my way, which didn't displease him any. But as he went back out to his car, he got caught in the rain.

"All right, the gun turns up in Augusta's closet and your ticket stub disappears, Lanning, just after he'd come in and gone through the bedroom to the bathroom.

"That didn't prove anything, of course, but when MacKinnon's search of his room at the Lodge didn't turn up the stub, I'd an idea he carried it with him. So I fixed it up with Owen's playmates to lift it off him when they were searching him for the checks he claimed Owen had forged. And Quick, who helped in the search, passed it on to me."

"But your room was *locked* at the Lodge," Marcia protested.

"He had a passkey. When Owen's men searched him they found the pullman stub and the passkey. Quick recognized it because he himself had one that Owen had given him earlier that night.

"So that was that," Hyer said, "but it was all pretty flimsy, and until I knew exactly what had happened to Mr. Thayer I didn't dare touch it for fear it would go to pieces. I decided to let him give himself a little more free rein and come down to the city by himself."

"And Pierre dismissed the servants?" Marcia asked. "Why?"

"TO GIVE him a free hand in the house in case something slipped up at the Camp and he had to wait until Beryl came back to New York to take care of her."

Rich said suddenly, "I get it now."

"Get what?"

"How you could have telephoned to him at his house in Forest Hills from the apartment last night and still he managed to be there ten minutes later to knock Quick and me out."

Hyer nodded. "That threw me off, too. I wouldn't have left you alone and gone downstairs if I hadn't thought I had proof he was a safe ten miles away. It had me stopped afterward—though I was too upset over Quick to bother with it much.

"Then when you and Marcia found that switchboard in the cubbyhole in Beryl's room, it cleared up. He was listening, of course, heard me call his own number. So he let it ring a couple of times, cut the connection, and talked to me directly from the second floor of the apartment."

"But how did he get in?" Marcia asked. "Miller says no one—"

"The same way Rich got out. He had the keys by that time. It was all very bright. If he hadn't been foolish enough to throw you into that place, it mightn't have come out for a long time.

"Still," Hyer said, "I didn't dare do anything until we knew we could produce—well, conclusive evidence. I should have thought of looking for that cab right at the start," resentfully. "Somehow it hadn't occurred to me he'd do it right in his own house. We know he didn't have a car Tuesday night—he'd left it near the Camp." He stopped, looked out the window uncomfortably. "So he had to use a cab. I should have seen that. So—"

"So," Marcia said in a steady voice, "you had them start digging in the basement. I'm all right now, Rich dear." In a moment she asked, "But why did Beryl drug you?"

Hyer's mouth twisted. "She had to get back something she had given me." He paused. "Owen's pedigree."

"Where *is* Owen?"

"Ten minutes ago," Hyer answered with some satisfaction, "he was in the West Sixty-eighth Street station house answering questions."

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"Answering questions?"

"In addition to a lot of other things," Hyer said, "Clearse Owen's right name is Aloysius Cleary and he is a very ingenious fellow. He'd invented a racket that ought to end all rackets. It's a wonder somebody didn't think of it a long time ago. A fortune-tellers' syndicate," he explained. "Big shots and little shots, all the way down to the gypsies, pooling their resources from one end of the country to the other. In a card-file that would have eventually made suckers out of all of us.

"The observatory up there was the clearing house, and whenever a Merlin anywhere in the country needed some quick information to impress a likely client, he could get it. Not only that, but when a local tycoon—say, one he hadn't been able to make any headway with—started for one of the big cities on a business trip, the home-town prophet could wire ahead, fix a set-up, and get a percentage. Some of the honest professionals were a little touchy about coming in and they got the heat turned on 'em. Beryl's Mar-Yolo seems to have been the leader of the hold-outs. They were trying to fight Owen with his own weapons."

There was a long silence. "But why?" Marcia asked in a low voice. "Why did Pierre do it all?"

HYER said, "You mean, why did he do the first murder? God knows. Motives are very doubtful things. Maybe he really needed the money. If so, it'll turn up at the trial. Maybe he was actually afraid your father, under Owen's influence, was likely to ruin the business. He hated Owen and had probably brooded over it. All we know is that he did it. That's all the law asks for. The law isn't interested in motives."

Marcia sat up. "But the watch?" she said. "How did you happen to have Dad's watch, Rich?"

Rich looked at Hyer. He said, "All right. That's the last one. Can you do it?"

Hyer said, "I did it. At Augusta's. Her clock had stopped that Monday night because when the current went off, it broke. But she knew she went to bed at eleven-ten, even though she hadn't been playing the radio, which is the usual substitute for a timepiece. So that meant she had had a timepiece.

"Mr. Thayer stopped in; let her borrow his watch. When you found it in a drawer probably, you were just a mite worried as to how it got there, and since it was sentimentally valuable to you, you took it. When MacKinnon found it, you got stubborn. Right?"

Rich said, "Right to a T."

Marcia said, "I know how they felt at the banquet when Columbus stood the egg on end."

Presently they turned out of Seventh Avenue into Greenwich.

Hyer leaned forward, said, "Hey, you can't get into Bank Street from this end. It's the wrong way. Never mind," quickly. "I'll just get out here at the corner and walk down."

As he opened the door, Marcia put her hand over his. She said, "Wait, we can't—I want to talk—there's so much more I want to talk to you about."

"There'll always be."

"Come with us."

Hyer got out, took off his hat. "Thanks."

"But where do you have to go?"

Hyer chuckled. "I've a date at a hospital. I've got to run home and clean up a little first."

"We'll all go," eagerly.

Hyer shook his head. "Tomorrow. I've got to break house rules to get in this late tonight." He coughed. "You really want to go up and see him?"

Rich held out his hand. "I can't think of anything I want to do more. You've been—"

"That's the wrong tense," Hyer said, his tone brisk again. "What time tomorrow?"

Marcia leaned forward as Hyer closed the door and stood, hat in hand, by the open window. She said softly, "Do you remember what I said in front of the fire that night?" When Hyer's face was momentarily blank, her lips lifted in an unsteady smile, and she said, "You know I said there were probably three people in the whole world

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who mattered a hoot to me. I can think of *five* now. And I don't have to try really hard. Good night—Hank."

Hyer watched the cab move away and turned to start along Bank street. He chuckled. The chuckle died, and his jaw dropped.

He stopped, blinked, stared dazedly into the fruit store he was passing.

Its brightly lighted windows were piled high with avocados, scores of avocados, hundreds of avocados, a lavish, Gargantuan, Neronian display of avocados. Within the small shop, one whole wall was smothered in crates—of avocados.

In the midst of this lush and highly selective jungle stood a short dark Sicilian, his teeth gleaming in a smile at once feral, seductive, and faintly apprehensive.

For a moment the two men faced each other across the threshold.

As Hyer's jaw rose and his eyes narrowed, Tony's apprehension bloomed into slow truculence. The truculence in turn faded as Tony's swarthy countenance, like a mirror-image, echoed Hyer's own dawning grin.

Tony said: "You promise you buy all my avocados."

Hyer started to speak, cleared his throat. "Tony," he said, with an admiration that all but overpowered him, "you are *not* a Sicilian pirate. You're a black-leg, thimble-rigging, buccaneering, swindling, privateering Henry Morgan." He gazed at the merchandise for which he had so lightly contracted in the pressure of events the night before.

Reluctantly he reached for his checkbook. His grin widened. "Take 'em up to Mt. Sinai hospital, Tony. There's a kid there that— Wait a minute. Take 'em to all the hospitals, as far as they'll go. There'll be kids in all of 'em."

With awe in his manner, he folded open the checkbook and reached for the outsize fountain pen in his vest pocket.

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Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

IT'S been a long time now since anybody has come through with one of those mysterious and splendid rating charts. They are mysterious because they are absolute and final; they are splendid in their clarity. With today's mad confusion in the world around us, we derive a special pleaure from any sort of thing that is precise and assured.

So we're very glad to present another report card. Our judge seems to feel that we're shoving forward too many new authors. Well, mebbe. But there's this to remember: a gentleman named C. S. Forester —who rates an A in the list below—was an ARGOSY discovery two years ago. If the readers don't look sharp, another of these brash newcomers will be turned into a classic.

But here are the minuses and pluses and percentages compiled by

DARREL LEFEVER

Norman Siringer style, I shall try to rate the serials and short novels in ARGOSY for Jan. and Feb. in the three succeeding years, 1940, 1939, and 1938 in order to give you an idea of whether the magazine is deteriorating, forging ahead, or merely staying as it has been for several years. However, I will base my ratings on a little different system from what N. S. uses.

It goes as follows: A=90 to 100%, B=80 to 90%, C=70 to 80%, and D= 60 to 70%. I have rated only serials and short novels, however, as I believe the novelets and short stories are about on a par with each other in all three years with those for 1940 only a very slight bit lower.

1938—January and February

Carson of Venus.....Burroughs–B+
London Skies .....Radcliffe–C+
Golden Acres .....Short–B—
Trouble Wagon .....Chase–B+
Ship of the Line.....Forester–A

The average for Jan.-Feb., 1938 was 85.8—10.8 points above the ARGOSY average which is C or 75. There were five serials and no short novels during January and February, 1938.

1939—January and February

Synthetic Men of Mars.....Burroughs–B+
Eye of Doom.....Woolrich–B
Death Due North.....Elston–B
Steamboat Gold .....Ogden–D
Help! Murder! Police!!.....Adams–C
Glamour Guy .....Painton–C
Lost Harbors .....Elston–A—
Fast and Loose.....Page. C+

The average for Jan.-Feb., 1939 was 81—6 points above the ARGOSY average. There were 6 serials and 2 short novels during January and February, 1939.

1940—January and February

Archers to the Front.....Horn–C+
Minions of Mars.....Beyer–B—
Fate Wove a Rug....Appleton & Goodwin–C
Seal of Treason.....Montgomery–D
The White Oomailik.....Pierce–B+
The Whisper Trail.....Coburn–C+
Then I'll Remember.....Warren–C
Calamity River.....Chidsey–D+
Green Flame .....North–D

The average for Jan.-Feb., 1940 was 74.56—.44 points below the ARGOSY average. There were 6 serials and 3 short novels.

I think that the reason that the 1940 average has fallen is because you are not getting the authors that we are accustomed to. Instead, you rely on new or comparatively new authors and those less asked for. Elston, Burroughs and Short, not to mention Forester, can be depended on to bring up anybody's average.

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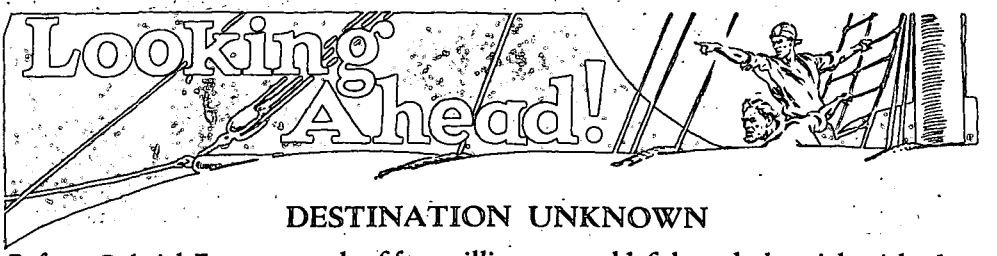

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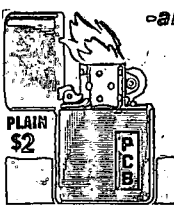

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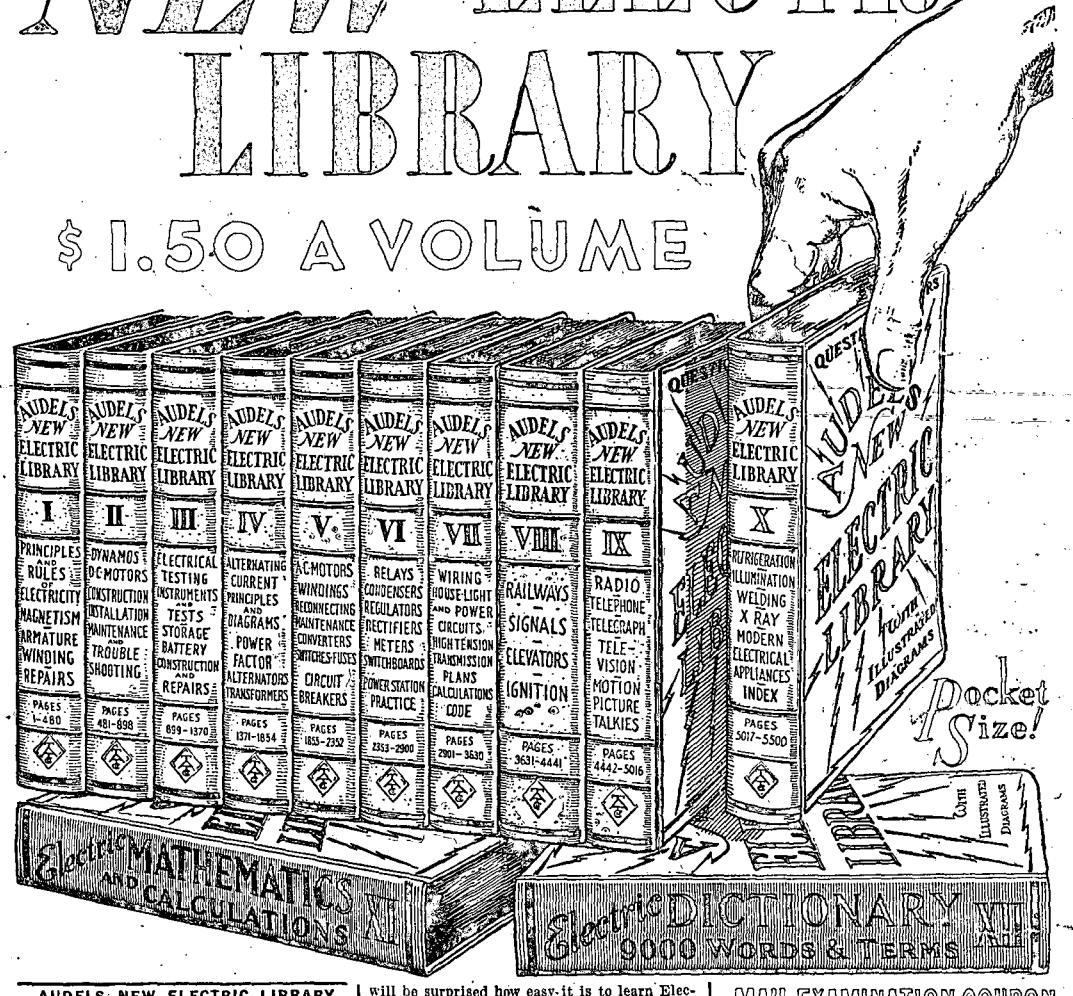
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